

Workers do the Logo motion on a personal voyage of discovery



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You've done the management course and you've learned well what have you learned? This article looks at one form of coaching that aims to keep staff motivated and their company successful.

Roz Paterson, Sunday Herald 9 September, 01

Wanna make a million? Then set yourself up as a management consultant, offer one-day courses in leadership and team-building, order in the mineral water and Prêt A Manger sandwiches and sit back as the lolly rolls in. OK. So if you're completely clueless you'll eventually get found out – but not necessarily as quickly as you'd think.

Because, says Jonathan Frost, founder of Discovery Coaching, people don't expect one-off training courses to work anyway. "You can leave a seminar full of enthusiasm for change but when you're back at your desk surrounded by the usual old hassles and priorities, with nobody to talk about these new ideas you just had thrown at you, it's difficult to stay motivated."

This, in turn, results in the bizarre phenomenon of company managers booking the same people on to the same courses year after year. "Once should be enough but they just assume they'll need to do it again in 12 months' time."

Frost, whose retail management career took him from South Africa's Wooltru Group (then part of Marks & Spencer) to Habitat and then to his own management consultancy, offers a flipchart-free solution – 10 minutes of coaching a day, six days a week, for six weeks.

"No matter how good a trainer you are, and how inspiring in the classroom, you're not going to undo 10 years of bad habits in one six hour workshop."

But you might, if you tackle them over time. And if it sounds a little like personal coaching, the system whereby wannabe high-fliers dial up their shoulder-padded life coach for a 30 second pep talk every other Friday, it is. In both cases, the desire for improvement must be close to the client's heart and the methods used to achieve it must either originate with the client or be fully approved of by him.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this "no, what do you think?" approach has been very successful in the retail industry, from whence that least listened to of species – the shop assistant – derives.

During the hard sell 1980s, shop staff were regarded as dispensable drones, there to flog Scotchguard and eyeball shoplifters. Now thanks to low unemployment and an increasingly competitive high street, managers are beginning to realise that good motivated staff are worth their weight in till receipts.

A report issued earlier this year by the Hay Group predicted that, within the next 10 years, the status of shop workers would increase substantially, not just because presentable, socially-skilled people are good in shops. They're also wanted by hotel groups, leisure complexes and other areas of the burgeoning service industry, now comprising more than 60% of the Scottish job market.

Which means finding a compelling reason to make them stay other than salary, which is pretty equal across the board. Good training, coupled with good prospects and a little bit of listening on the manager's part, could be the answer.

But empowering your shop staff requires more than a four-hour lecture on body language. "What we offer is practical, not airy-fairy or theoretical. If the baby won't stop crying, you don't phone a child psychologist, you phone your mum because you want advice that's to the point."

To this end Discovery Coaching encourages shop staff to stop thinking of themselves as shop staff. Odd perhaps, but if your idea of a shop assistant is a gum-cracking adolescent blocking the way to the changing room, then that's probably their idea of one too.

"They're encouraged to think of their own experience of shopping and what they like about it. Things like having a laugh with their pals and getting honest advice – and then thinking how they can use that experience at work. We want to tap into the personality they are outside work and, once you've got the basics of friendliness, the sales follow."

Twenty-one-year-old Ashley Paterson, manager of the St. Enoch Centre branch of Logo, a company which embraced Discovery Coaching three years ago, explains that the girls in her shop "are honest if something doesn't look right, just like they would with a friend. Not in a rude way, they'll just steer them towards something better."

Which might explain why, come Saturday, the shop goes like a fair and even the customers who are just in to kill time often end up buying a hair slide or two. To ensure that such lessons are ingested at every level of the company, Frost begins at the top and relies on a trickle down effect. He coaches the managers coaxing them towards discovery of solutions to problems and ideas for improvement.

"You learn better if you discover the answers rather than have them recited to you. But we're there to make sure you discover the right things – we don't want someone concluding that shop assistants are useless, for instance."

Managers then use the same method, assisted by Discovery Coaching Activities. In a retail environment such as Logo, this could be something like putting an outfit together.

Then they would use the Three Review Questions on their staff. These questions would be used after some customer/assistant interaction, and would consist of considering what went well, what went badly and what you would do differently next time. This technique would then filter down the layers of management of the shop floor. Thus everyone is "discovering" every day.

Which sounds like a mandate for overbearing bosses to nag the very will to live from their staff. But Frost insists this is not the case.

“A lot of the staff like the fact that what they do is noticed and that they get positive feedback as well. There’s nothing worse than working hard and nobody notices. Or someone beside you is doing nothing at all and nobody notices.”

For Aberdeen based Logo, whose target market is female aged 15-25 and whose competition includes such well established names as Miss Selfridge and Top Shop, the challenge is to retain its chirpy, personable identity while expanding throughout Scotland and, latterly, into England.

An American-style uniformity – that “have a nice day now” stuff, complete with baseball caps in the company colours – was highly inappropriate for their youthful, fashion-conscious customer base, never mind the fact that we Brits are generally turned off by rehearsed cheerfulness.

When that happens, it’s a case of not thinking what the customer wants. Do they really want someone at the shop door smiling, saying hello and being blanked all day long? Logo staff don’t seem to think so, so don’t expect a bear hug when you walk in.

Ifikar Mian, Logo’s retail operations manager, has been impressed by the scheme, not just because sales staff are increasing year in year or that staff turnover is relatively low for such a volatile sector, but also because his staff have been empowered to think for themselves.

“It’s a self-service industry basically, which means customers’ needs are more subtle, and our staff are learning to read those needs and respond to them,” he says.

Meaning they know we have the numerical skills to locate a size 12 all by ourselves.

And that when we ask “does my bum look big in this?”, we want an honest (but exceedingly tactful) answer.

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