
Getting ROI On Your Investment In Communication Training

by SUZANNE BATES

It is extremely important to get a significant return on any investment in training and development. Leaders will only participate in professional development when they believe it will achieve results. The best way to show exactly what the ROI will be is to engage an outside coaching firm.

When considering communication development, things to look at include strategy, message or skill development. In all of these it may seem difficult to measure ROI. Communication is still regarded as a soft skill, so the assumption is that you cannot measure it. That's not the case. A skilled consulting firm should be able to answer your questions, explain their process, and set clear goals and timelines for enhancing individual and team performance. Before beginning any training or coaching program, there should be a plan in place with action steps and accountability.

Organizations are generally presented with traditional assessment tools such as Meyers Briggs and DISC. However, there may be other communication assessment tools such as those that assess communication style, presentations and sales. Exploring these other tools that are easy to use and understand can add real value. They will provide more useable information that adds context to traditional leadership evaluation tools.

Pinpointing Gaps

The reason it is so important to lay the foundation with communication assessments is that you can pinpoint skill gaps and create a customized coaching and training program for leaders and their teams. This baseline becomes a touchstone reference you can use throughout a training program, whether the time horizon is a few months or a few years.

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You can structure the training program so that you are able to report up through the organization on progress along the way. If you have a spreadsheet with goals, action steps, timelines, resources and measurements of progress, you and a team of decision-makers can have informed conversations about where you are now and where you want to go with each leader.

In addition to assessment, another way to ensure you get the most from your investment is to thoroughly understand the process and approach of each coach. A results-oriented coaching program should be based on solid, proven techniques.

Some of the principles that add great value and assure return on investment in communication coaching and consulting are understanding the value of time, planning ahead, structuring

the program, making it mandatory, keeping it flexible and allowing clients to engage in self-evaluation.

Value of Time

One of the most important lessons a coach learns when working with busy executives is the value of time. Today, the demands on people are tremendous; meeting mania, calendar competition, e-mail and others that didn't exist five years ago are adding pressure like never before. Even executives and professionals who have developed time management skills feel overwhelmed, and may be reluctant to carve out time for skill development.

One of the secrets to getting coaching on the calendar is to assure the client you will work in real time on current projects. For example, if an executive has a board meeting on the calendar next week, that should be the focus of the coaching session. Keeping business goals front and center is another secret to getting busy executives engaged and motivated. When you work in real time on important projects, you are sure to see real results at the next meeting, providing great return on investment.

Plan Ahead

Another way to ensure ROI is to set up coaching

or training appointments well in advance and plan other activities around them. If a major corporate meeting down the road will require considerable brainstorming and writing, then that content needs to be started now, and you should add additional time for content development and rehearsals to the calendar.

Don't Make it Optional

Many organizations set up training as opt-in sessions and then are disappointed when the people who need it most don't show up. This is a major challenge for human resource departments, because you want to be sure that people who attend training want to feel that it's voluntary. On the other hand, it's often just too easy for people to sign up for something and then get pulled away by an "emergency."

Structure the Programs

Coaching should be a structured program of needs assessment, goal setting, and skill building with a coach who guides the client towards achieving the set goals. Training programs should offer a formal, organized approach to improving communication skills and strategies. Between sessions, individuals should be working on specific skills so they see steady progress.

Stay Flexible

Coaching and training plans are roadmaps. They cannot anticipate every turn or curve. A client may have personal or family matters. They may be promoted, or have an exciting new opportunity to present at a conference or speak to the media. When this happens, a coach should be flexible about how, when and where to work together. Even coaching, which requires face-to-face interaction, can be supplemented by phone time or e-mail. Flexibility allows the client relief and offers assurance that the coach will be there and work in a way that makes sense.

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Allow for Self-Evaluation

Once the clients have a chance to weigh in on their own performance, they can be observant and candid about their needs. In communication coaching, allowing a client to watch a video always produces astute comments. Videotaping over months or years allows that person to monitor their progress.

Giving clients an opportunity to evaluate themselves is one of the keys to winning buy-in. Most of us know what we need to do; however, it is when we have a chance to articulate those needs in our own way that it is anchored in our minds, and we are motivated to go forward.

Proper evaluation of skills and adhering to proven techniques will help you and your organization see return on investment in coaching and training. Engage individuals and the organization early in the process, get an accurate snapshot, and be mindful of these principles, and you will deliver successful training and development programs that get real business results. ▣

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