

Minding the Skills Gap: The Power of Learning

By Kim M. Catania and Steve Gielda

Training can be a strategy for winning



Learning and development (L&D) programs are not just “nice to have” or “check the box” – they are essential for talent growth and staying ahead of competition. And, perhaps most importantly, they help the sales team accelerate revenue in the life sciences industry.

Why Does L&D Matter?

- **Talent development:** Well-designed training programs develop and retain talent, boost bench strength and boost morale and engagement. When employees feel valued and empowered, they are more likely to be dedicated, motivated and productive.
- **Innovation and problem-solving:** Good, engaging learning programs foster a culture of innovation by encouraging employees to think critically, experiment and develop new solutions to challenges.
- **Regulatory compliance:** Our industry operates under strict regulatory guidelines. Clear, ongoing training ensures that employees understand and adhere to these regulations, mitigating the risk of costly non-compliance.
- **Supports strategic alignment:** Oftentimes, companies fail to align L&D to the business outcomes their sales and marketing teams are striving to achieve. Consequently, programs are quickly designed to plug a hole in the dam, instead of supporting the critical knowledge, skills and processes needed to help the sales team achieve their critical business outcomes.

What Should Employees Be Trained On?

There is a wide range of core skills and behaviors that align with key competencies for each role, as defined by specific organizations. Essential L&D includes:

- **Industry knowledge:** Focus on ongoing product, disease-state and current competitor strategies and up-to-date industry trends.
- **Power skills:** Hone key skills like emotional intelligence, collaboration and communication, growth mindset, problem-solving, lead without authority and strategic networking to create a power culture for success.
- **Leadership development:** Identify and develop emerging leaders, first-line leaders, second-line leaders and beyond for consistent culture and organizational growth.

However, how do you decide the priority of your training? Do you simply fill the greatest gap of the team, or should you train on the skills and knowledge that support the sales goals and strategic metrics the sales organization is striving to reach in the next 12 months?

It’s easy to argue that filling the competency gaps makes good sense, but what if those specific competencies don’t support the strategic imperative of the sales team, like preparing for a lower cost competitor or driving greater adoption of a solution?

As sales training professionals, we must understand that our customer is the sales organization. Our goal is to help the sales team perform better on the job, which often means helping them better execute the sales strategies being put forth by the sales leadership team.

What Does Impactful Training Look Like?

First, no training should ever be “one and done.” Ever.

So often companies roll out training and expect that their training changed everything; the box was checked and they expect the learners to walk away ready to implement whatever was shared.

Training is an ongoing process. Effective L&D are not one-time events. They must be ongoing processes to ensure that employees continue to develop skills, change behaviors and enhance competence. Consider implementing a process where the sales training team meets with sales leadership regularly to enhance understanding of the sales strategies that the sales team needs to execute to drive successful results and to uncover what’s working, what’s not and why. For example, if objections are not being handled properly, is there a need for another objection handling workshop, or perhaps the leaders need to implement additional coaching and modeling to pull the learning through effectively?

Consider building or enhancing a continuous learning culture that encourages employees at all levels to seek out new opportunities for ongoing professional development. Is there an opportunity for employees to build development plans, have mentors and organizational support for ongoing learning? For example, through a learning management system or hub, leadership development with a focus on coaching, access to LinkedIn Learning, coordinated peer sharing sessions to discuss experiences and field-based trainers to share key insights.

A Framework for Training

- **Sales alignment meeting:** Meet with the sales leadership team to align organizational goals for the upcoming year and the unique sales strategies that the team is executing that will drive success.
- **Needs assessment:** Identify the specific skills and knowledge gaps that need to be addressed to support the sales results that must be achieved.
- **Learning objectives:** Clearly define and demonstrate alignment of how the desired learning outcomes from the training support the business outcomes of the sales team.
- **Program design:** Develop a training program that is engaging, relevant and aligned with both sales strategies and the identified learning objectives.
- **Delivery methods:** Consider multiple modalities to roll out and maximize learning impact. Include components like pre-work, live and/or virtual training, self-directed e-learning, coaching, peer share sessions and on-the-job activities. Ensure coaching and sustainment pull-through guides are available for leaders, trainers and mentors to guide learners to successful implementation.
- **Evaluation:** Measure the effectiveness of the training program to identify areas for improvement and ensure that it is achieving the intended goals. Course-correct as needed.

Instructional Design and Training Models

There are many – let’s focus on the most simple, impactful one: discover, practice and apply. Simply stated:

- **Discover:** Train learners on a new topic.
- **Practice:** Engage learners with one another to practice implementing what they just learned.
- **Apply:** See how this new skill or information is applied in the real world to drive the behaviors needed to support the expected outcomes.

Then, it is critical for trainers, leaders and mentors to pull-through the learnings for ongoing development, growth and sustainment. This includes check-in sessions, sharing key insights, peer share sessions, coaching and modeling what “good” is.

What’s It All Worth? Measure the Impact

Evaluating development and growth requires ongoing assessment of progress, skill development, impact on business outcomes and engagement. Incorporate learning goals and progress into coaching sessions, evaluations and self-assessments. The most accurate measure of the effectiveness of continuous learning can be observed in professional development, improved productivity and the successful attainment of sales results.

To measure the effectiveness of training and development programs, it is essential to track key metrics, such as:

- **Learner confidence:** Measure learner confidence through pre-event and post-event surveys for each skill trained.
- **Knowledge retention:** Conduct ongoing knowledge checks and implementation evaluations (such as field visits and coaching sessions) to assess how well employees retain and incorporate the information learned.
- **Skill enhancement and behavioral changes:** Observe whether the training has led to improved skills and competence for continued growth.
- **Business outcomes:** Evaluate the impact of the training on key business metrics such as productivity and goal achievement.

The Bottom Line

Invest in ongoing L&D programs that equip employees at all levels with key skills to change behaviors and uplevel competence.

This will ultimately create a more engaged, skilled and innovative workforce – one that is invested in the success of the organization. In turn, it leads to goal achievement and long-term success. ■



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