



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Provide Quick Learning Events Through a Lunch and Learn Program

When you tell people that they need to strengthen their skills, you also have an obligation to be supportive of their needs. Of course, the employee should certainly take the lead on his/her own skills development plan by committing to learning and improving over time. He/she also needs to understand that a person that stops growing personally, professionally and technically is putting his/her career at risk.

That being said, the organization and the manager must be supportive of their employees' development needs as well. This includes allowing some time each month for employees to build new skills or strengthen their current skill set. There are many ways to build skills, including magazines, books, computer-based training, and coaching from an experienced employee. One additional technique that is often used successfully is the lunch and learn program.

The Basics

Lunch and learn programs are a way to provide learning opportunities to your group (or to the entire organization). The beauty of them is that they are relatively easy to put on and relatively painless for people to attend. The basics are as follows:

Pick a topic and instructor. This area just takes a little creativity. Lunch and learns are typically led by someone from within your company, perhaps within your team. You don't need to go out and hire someone for the session. You can look for people with expertise in areas that they can share with others. Topics can be diverse, including technical topics, programming techniques, writing skills, project management skills, estimating, etc. You can even have people from your business clients come in and tell your group more about they do.

Put together the agenda and material. There are many formats for the lunch and learn, depending on the subject. For instance, sometimes the instructor will put together 20 PowerPoint slides and put on the session from those. If the subject is on a programming language, the instructor might reference program code. The session could even just be a round-table discussion, without much formal preparation ahead of time.

Schedule the time and put on the session. As the name implies, the session is usually scheduled for 60 to 90 minutes, over lunch time. In many cases, the session might be 11:30 – 1:00, or 12:00 – 1:00. You need to leave a little bit of time on the front end for people to get their lunch. The sessions are designed to be informal. You actually want people to bring their lunch with them and eat it during the session.

A lot of good can come from a lunch and learn program

Lunch and learn is a program that has many benefits for the staff, and no obvious negatives. It's not a free lunch, but it is a low-risk (if not a risk-free) lunch. Let's look at the value in a program like this.



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They provide learning opportunities. First, a lunch and learn program provides ongoing learning opportunities. You want to try to sponsor these events on an ongoing basis – monthly if possible. The sessions are designed to share knowledge between someone who knows something and others who don't. These sessions are not considered training. There is not enough time for real training. What you are doing is “exposing” staff to topics that can help them grow. You are building awareness. In many cases, that is all that is required.

They are inexpensive. In most cases, lunch and learn sessions have no cost. You are only investing time from the standpoint of the instructor and the staff attending. The group manager might even pay for a group lunch if the number of attendees were reasonable.

There is little time commitment. As was just mentioned, the session is designed to overlap with lunch, which minimizes any downtime. Much of the staff takes the lunch hour off anyway. This is a way to take advantage of this time to have lunch and to learn something at the same time.

They provide exposure for the instructor. These sessions are good for the attendees, but they are also good for the instructor. Hosting a lunch and learn session allows the instructor to gain some exposure among his/her peers and managers. It also allows him/her to practice speaking in front of a group.

Team building. Don't overlook the team building aspects of this program. If the lunch and learns are sponsored for the benefit of a group or a department, they provide an opportunity to get together on a periodic basis. Getting people together allows them to better know each other and helps build teamwork and camaraderie in the work environment.

What's the catch?

There is little that can go wrong on this program. It is inexpensive and unobtrusive. It helps build skills and build teamwork. The only potential problem is that if the session is not put on very well, people may feel they have wasted their time. However, this is very rarely the case. The staff is much more lenient and empathetic to the plight of the instructor since they know that the instructor is one of their own and doing the best he/she can.

Summary

An ongoing lunch and learn program is an excellent way to provide learning events for your staff. While it does not count as formal training, these sessions can still provide value in terms of providing some specific techniques that people can use, as well as providing general awareness of the subject. Consider setting a program up and having a lunch and learn session every month. Between your company and your group, you should never run out of topics.