



YOUR LINK TO A SKILLED WORKFORCE.

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Breathing Life into Training

Workplace Learning Initiatives

Being a frontline manager can be like being the meat in the sandwich.

“You’ve got pressures from senior management and you’ve got different pressures from the shopfloor – and somehow you’ve got to make it all happen quickly, efficiently and to the highest possible standards.” So said Brent McGregor the Assembly Manager from Burgess Furniture, an Australian owned company based in Preston and specialising in the manufacture of high quality furniture for the domestic and export markets. About four years ago Burgess decided that training for its frontline managers would be critical to the redevelopment and reorganisation that was necessary to save the company.

The Strategy

Phil Smith, then the General Manager recognised that not only did shop floor operators and their team leaders need new skills, there was also a need for a change in the culture of the organisation. *“We knew we had to turn things around. We had to improve our communication skills and our ability to work together to find efficiency, productivity and quality solutions. We had to shift from blaming to claiming responsibility and we needed to develop the strategies for doing that right across the shopfloor.”* said Smith. The strategy the company adopted was to open their doors to an external training provider with specialist skills in enterprise based training. The provider they chose was Workplace Learning Initiatives. *“We invited them in and we put one of their teachers on our shopfloor. He worked with us two days a week, in seminars and training sessions but also in our production and planning meetings. On our rostered days off we got together to address problems and the trainers provided more input and suggested strategies. They built the learning strategies around our objectives and our targets. They facilitated the process but insisted we pick up responsibility for making it work.”*

Brent continues the story. *“In the beginning we came together to talk about quality. I had never had any trouble talking with the guys from on the floor, but I was a little apprehensive at the idea of talking with other managers, particularly when relations were often strained or non-existent. Blame gets thrown around whenever things go wrong. Being a bit younger doesn’t help either. It was quite a surprise to find out that each of us (the sections) had different notions about quality. Each group had developed standards that met their own needs and purposes rather than the whole organisation. But I suppose this reflected the sort of ‘mini-factories’ set-up that existed. We didn’t have much to do with each other. We had even developed a bit of rivalry. So very early in the piece, the group started to work on quality issues.”*

It turned out that arriving at an agreed set of quality principles was not such a simple task. *“Our Dispatch Manager, Wayne, kept on feeding information back to us from our sales team and customers, which angered and disappointed a lot of people. It seems we were getting the messenger and the message mixed up. Fortunately Wayne could take it and after*



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a series of meetings, we discovered that creating standards required a high level of consensus and cooperation. I mean, When is a gap a gap? Answer: When the customer says it's a gap!"

Benefits & Results

The frontline managers found that new standards and strategies were possible in a range of areas. As they developed their skills in working together as a team and working with their own production team members they began to reap some rewards. The company subsequently won the 'Manufacturer of the Year' award for the Australian Furniture Industry and one of its employees, Nick Oakley, won the major **furniture industry scholarship award**. As Brent noted *"It was like winning the Grand Final and the Brownlow in the one season. Becoming the Manufacturer of the Year ... I think the training has probably got a lot to do with that. Like if you look back to the stage when we started training, 'til now, we've had some huge increases in efficiency and quality is just second to none now."*

The training has benefited the company but those involved say they have also developed and benefited personally from the learning experiences. Sometimes the evidence is revealed in surprising ways. Joe the polishing manager at Burgess tells a story about being involved in a car accident. *"The other driver was extremely angry. But I was able to calm myself, put the other driver at ease and even reach an agreement with him. When I got back in the car my wife was astonished. She could not believe that I was able to do that. I explained to her that these were some of the skills that I was being coached in at work."*

Workplace Learning Initiatives

Many frontline managers have borne the brunt of re-structuring and reorganising processes in their workplaces. They have often been expected to facilitate and implement changes from above knowing that these same changes would be resisted from below. Little wonder they sometimes feel like the meat in the sandwich. Sophisticated skills in communication team building and negotiation are required. Relationships not only need to be built, but maintained and repaired. The process is ongoing, dynamic, constant and fundamentally necessary. Training providers skilled at understanding and engaging with the workplace culture can play a key role in these developmental processes. The training at Burgess Furniture was developed and implemented by Workplace Learning Initiatives a Northcote based registered training organisation within the state training system. The company specialises in enterprise-based learning and workplace change.

If you are interested in further exploring these or any other issue related to workplace learning, training and development, continuous improvement, and change management, please give us a call on 03 9486 8600 or email Peter Waterhouse at pwhouse@wli.com.au.



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