

6 Best Practices: Is Your Nonprofit Staff Training Effective?

Hire for passion and intensity; there is training for everything else.

- [Nolan Bushnell](#), technology pioneer

Whether or not you agree with Mr. Bushnell's hiring practices, a well-developed nonprofit staff training program is a worthwhile investment which will improve the overall outcomes of your organization.

According to [research](#), high-performing companies, on average, spend significantly more on training - and that spending is paying off! Effective employee training improves employee recruitment since job seekers are concerned with opportunities for learning and development. It also improves **employee retention**.

As reported in the [Harvard Business Review](#):

Dissatisfaction with some employee-development efforts appears to fuel many early exits...[Workers are] not getting much in the way of formal development, such as training, mentoring, and coaching—things they...value highly.

In fact, according to the [2014 Nonprofit Employment Practices Survey](#), 1 in 5 nonprofits indicated that high turnover has been their biggest employment challenge. While 19% of organizations identify the inability to promote or advance top performing staff as their main challenge.

In addition to these obvious direct benefits of employee training, research shows that effective employee training also improves employee productivity, and results in higher revenue, improved customer service, and better organizational loyalty. **So, we know training is important - but how do we do it?**

[Bersin & Associates](#) have identified four levels of training program maturity:

1. **Incidental Training:** Informal, unstructured “on-the-job” training
2. **Training & Developmental Excellence:** A team of training professionals builds a set of programs. Instructional design and technologies are standardized.
3. **Talent and Performance Improvement:** Training programs are integrated into career development models - training is mapped to career progression within the organization.
4. **Capability Development:** The focus moves from the employee to the organization, analyzing organizational capabilities and culture and improving performance through many types of learning.

Most smaller organizations are stuck between Levels 1 and 2. Taking your training program to the next

level can take years to complete but incremental changes - even for the smallest of the small nonprofits - can deliver monumental long-term results. So be realistic when considering what you can do for that new hire coming on board next month.

Here are a few best practices to get you started:

1. Training should support organizational goals

First, you have to identify attainable [organizational goals](#) and work towards them across all of the actions of our organization. Then, identify learning objectives for each training session that tie directly back to those organizational goals. If the training isn't going to help you achieve your goals, it's probably better to invest valuable resources elsewhere.

2. Effective training links to clearly articulated job descriptions and work processes

Similar to articulating organizational goals, you must also clearly articulate job descriptions and work processes. Once those are clearly defined, it's much easier for your training program to define what success looks like. [Check out this blog on 10 must-have skills for easily any job in nonprofit digital communications.](#)

3. Vary your training methods

While instructor-led training is great for the delivery of key skills and concepts, nothing beats ongoing coaching for reinforcing those concepts and fine-tuning the results. Remember to keep these sessions fun and engaging. [Don't let bad trainings happen to your nonprofit!](#) Overall, whether the coaching comes from managers or peer mentors, the basic steps are the same.

1. Present a new challenge in the form of a work-related task or project
2. Provide access to the knowledge and resources necessary to meet the challenge
3. Meet regularly during the completion of the task or project to provide meaningful feedback and mentoring

One quick caveat to coaching as an instructional strategy - coaching is also a skill which must be taught, practiced, and evaluated before implementation. You can't tell your staff (managerial or otherwise) to "provide coaching" without showing them how to do it!

4. New hires should complete a thorough orientation

Start early! Training new employees bonds them with senior staff and conveys that they're a valued part of the team. New hire orientation also exposes them to the organization's culture and sets a tone of continuous learning and improvement right from the beginning. Nonprofits are uniquely positioned to [inspire new employees](#) around the organization's mission. Nonprofit employees didn't sign up to process

invoices - "[connect their work](#) to finding a cure for cancer."

5. Job-related information and training should be readily available

Curating and managing job-related information is an ongoing task as the body of knowledge tends to grow over time. Identify the information and tools employees need to perform their jobs well and invest in a robust knowledge-management system so that they can find it.

6. Create a culture of learning

Let's face it - not every new employee you hire is going to intrinsically value learning, so it's important to convey that in your organization continuous learning is valued and rewarded.

Leaders must demonstrate that learning is valued by continuously seeking their own professional development opportunities and sharing their enthusiasm with staff.

They must also include learning outcomes in staff professional goal setting and performance evaluations. A culture of learning doesn't stop at formal training - we learn from each other. Organizational leadership should enable teamwork to facilitate this.

In closing, a well-developed training plan can take years to develop, evaluate, and refine.

As a starting point, identify your organizational goals and the specific information and skills each department must be taught in order to be successful. Then, you can map existing resources to the identified learning objectives (and identify any holes where new content must be developed).

Once you have all of your content, you can start to decide on the instructional methodology you want to use - instructor-led, coaching, or some combination of the two. Happy training!

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