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# Capturing the Teachable Moment: In-House Staff Development

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To seize the “teachable moment” in on-the-job training, like grasping a carousel’s brass ring, brings a sense of triumph and the delightful euphoria of accomplishment. But such an achievement is not merely serendipity. A library can improve the odds for multiple in-house staff development successes by intentionally constructing an organization and culture that support effective methods of adult education.<sup>1</sup>

What do I mean by the “teachable moment?” I mean the moment when required information is provided to an employee precisely when it is needed to accomplish a job task. The children’s librarian who urgently needs a colorful flier—tomorrow—is highly motivated to try a new computer graphics package. If the library can seize this opportunity and provide a trainer—which in a small library usually means a more knowledgeable colleague—the results are remarkably effective.

Funding training in smaller public libraries is especially challenging. But sparse dollars can be stretched by the thoughtful design of an in-house training plan which minimizes the costs of travel, release time, and tuition. Such a strategy can, often in only moments, convey information that is timely, focused, personalized, and in context. Thirty minutes of collaborative work producing a flier with the new graphics program can be a far more effective learning experience than a day long workshop off-site two months later.

The first step to capturing the “teachable moment” concept for your library is to create an environment that will encourage employees to search for new ideas and solutions. Adult learners tend to avoid activities that they believe will result in failure. Therefore, questions should be encouraged. It needs to be okay in your library not to know something. The deeper understanding that comes with questioning and discussing the underlying concepts of the library’s mission, circulation policies, or Internet access procedures encourages the employee to align with the library’s goals. This employee is then better prepared not only to explain these policies to the public, but to make informed exceptions in appropriate situations.

A second step is to define clear training objectives. Adults want to know what they will be expected to

learn in order to be successful. One way the Silver Falls Library District clarifies job expectations is by using individualized job standards, which each new employee receives within their first few weeks on the job. We also provide each new employee with a training plan which lists the specific skills they will be expected to master during the probationary period. An ideal opportunity for in-house training occurs when you hire a new employee. Our training plan is designed to sustain initial motivation by providing a challenging list of skills, each broken down into achievable elements. Employees are given the responsibility for their learning and performance. Addressing job standards as the initial step of the performance evaluation process creates a clear connection between training achievements and tangible rewards.

On-the-job training is an ideal way to provide opportunities to rehearse the skills necessary for job mastery. Knowing that the best learning occurs in a social context similar to that in which the skills and knowledge will be used, professional trainers and education facilities spend considerable money and effort trying to simulate what you have already—your work site. Studies suggest that new material is forgotten at a remarkable rate without immediate practice. Providing training when an employee’s need for a new skill is imminent, so that practice occurs within the process, is crucial to defining the “teachable moment.”

The trainer/coworker plays an integral part in this process as well. The trainer must analyze the task, consider pace and learning style in presenting information, and provide specific feedback to the students to guide them toward mastery. The trainer must also recognize that the adult learner brings many life experiences into the workplace which should be acknowledged, tapped and used. An additional advantage of cooperative study with a respected peer is that the achievement level of the trainer is also raised during the process. Such training, particularly across departments within a library, can enhance respect, build the work team, and improve understanding of the whole organization, in addition to the more direct goals of easing scheduling conflicts and improving public service. Studies show cooperative learning promotes positive feelings of personal worth and positive attitudes toward the skills being taught.

Learning is a process in which students take information, interpret it, connect it to what they already know, and if necessary, reorganize their view of the functionality of the work environment. An accurate mental model develops from the way events flow on-the-job, how devices function and can malfunction, and serves as the map to guide personal action when problems are encountered. By using the concept of the “teachable moment,” staff in even a small public library can move toward the ideal of excellence.

<sup>1</sup>A good summary of adult training research can be found at [www.nprdc.navy.mil/wworks/cover.htm](http://www.nprdc.navy.mil/wworks/cover.htm). References to research mentioned in that article are cited here.