



Professional Development

By Dr. Wayne Applewhite

Professional Development has become one of those activities with mixed reviews. Yes, professional development has postured individuals, groups, teams, organizations, industries, and communities for success. But, does everyone utilizing this course of action ultimately realize the benefit or are they merely satisfying the need to ‘tick the box’ that says this quarter requirement is complete? What is really retained by those participating or more importantly, embraced and implemented for the betterment of their personal and professional success to include their respective places of business?

Professional development comes in all shapes and sizes. Traditionally we can suggest certifications, continuing education units, college degrees (undergraduate and graduate), seminars, workshops, in-services, off-site team building, and the list goes on. Non-traditional development has seen the evolution and emergence of professional executive coaching, personal trainers, partnering, EMBA’s, and the list (although not quite as long as in the traditional sense) goes on.

During the late 1980’s and early 1990’s we heard corporate America complain about the MBA graduates’ abilities to ‘crunch numbers’ but were concerned because their new hired MBA did not have/learn the management skill sets in the program to manage or lead. During this time period, the Executive MBA (some are quite successful) sprang up via on-line education as well as the traditional class setting to satisfy yet another need; as its’ name sake suggests, executive leadership. Likewise, process control programs, quality programs, continuous process improvement programs, courses on negotiation, and sales training conventions, again to name a few, also arose to seemingly fill the gaps that had become evident within our businesses and corporations around the nation, if not the globe; we do some things well but management, process improvement, and leadership (to some extent) was still resting on trial and error, experience and or knowledge from the old guard.

Who Seeks Professional Development and Who Does Not? Let’s ask ourselves who really seeks professional development to obtain the benefits from it and who is looking to check a box on the ‘ole resume or job profile?

The first part of the question is easy. Those individuals truly interested in self improvement, personal and professional success, emerging leaders (young and mature) that have their eyes set on the future as a VP, Senior VP, Executive VP, and CEO, if not Chairman of the Board. These

individuals have already embraced the continuous learning practice and seek knowledge from all avenues; mentors, coaches, peers, bosses, subordinates, spouses, friends, you name it, these individuals understand that learning should be practiced constantly and chances to learn can be found in a variety of forms.

The second part of the question is the one where seemingly a larger population of those that are offered professional development, fall.

There are many in the corporate world that feel as though they already know it all, have seen it all, have heard it all, and have done it all. Maybe they have. Maybe they have not. They think because they have been doing this or that for many years (or have an advanced degree or a super duper certification), that there is nothing they can be taught about their trade, skill sets, or abilities.

Yet, if we take a look at this from another perspective, we might ask ourselves the question; “Should I really sign up for professional development; will I actually learn something to bring back to the job?”

Whom do we know in our world, that constantly seeks advice to ensure they have that edge on the competition or just want to maintain their skill sets, if not continue to enhance them as they progress in their chosen profession? Whom do we know that make millions upon millions of dollars and still seek those that can offer sage and sound advice to keep these individuals in question on top? Whom do we know that are the best of the best, yet they still have surrounded themselves with advisors? Any ideas as to who these individuals might be?

How about this as an answer: professional sports figures, professional actors, and professional singers. What about doctors, lawyers, and yes, some top level executives across the corporate spectrum? Most (if not all) of these individuals have coaches, trainers, new techniques to be pondered, constant changing laws, advances in their fields, and breakthrough technology that cannot be ignored. But quite frankly, you knew that, you just might not have thought about it.

So why do so many in management or leadership roles, not take full advantage of the added help that is available to them? Good question!

Another perspective that we should address is the what. What do those successful individuals (professional athletes, entertainers, business executives, lawyers, doctors, etc.) that are coached/trained/developed do with the information provided to them to help them become better? Oddly enough, they use it! They actually put it in practice to help themselves and their respective organizations do better. A novel approach to be sure.

Let me ask a rhetorical question. What would the headlines have read if a few of the organizations within the past 7 to 10 years had actually put in practice some of the ethics, management, diversity, and leadership “training” they (by documentation) actually undertook?

Let's Be Honest, Does It Really Help? The correct answer here is, "it depends." It depends on the type of professional development and the reason you are pursuing it. If it is one of those lets go so we can check the box, of course it has no value or benefit to you or the organization, not to mention a huge waste of money and other precious resources such as time and people power.

However, if you understand what you need to help you and your organization transform to the next level of responsibility and commitment, it is absolutely worth the time and money spent in its pursuit. But, you have to use what you have learned to make it work. One of my most cherished feedback comments came from the CEO of one of our clients (in which we had the pleasure of working with over two full days at an off-site Leadership Laboratory™, with the CEO and 5 of his partners) was: "...this was well worth our time and money." We are in communication with them at least quarterly and it is evident that they are implementing many of the "tools" we experimented with and are practicing many of the leadership efforts that we discussed as well. It really does work!

If you want it to work for you, your firm, your organization, your business, your company, first you have to decide what it is you really need. Then seek a "quality" product or service and send only those individuals that are thirsty for self-improvement to that particular professional development activity. When they return, sit down with them. Talk with them. Find out what they discussed. Empower them to slowly implement or help you implement some (if not all over time) of the tools brought back from the professional development engagement. Measure the progress, the benefit, and the experience. Measure the success and failures. If it is working, send them back for more and if at all possible, find the professional development firm that will partner with you (long term relationship) to help you (your company) do well. You want them to come back again and again over time to develop others in your company too.

One more thought on the 'finding a quality professional development activity', not one of them is a one-size-fits-all (no matter how much they profess), not one; do your homework.

Now here is my last question for you. Where do you stand or have you stood in the professional development arena, are you in it for the benefit or simply to check the box?

Thank you for your time.

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