

## Five Reasons Why Your Training Investment May Not Be Working

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In 2002, states claimed \$285.7 million under Title IV-E and Adoption Assistance training. Adding state match and funds from other sources, states may have invested more than \$500 million on child welfare training. Are program administrators getting what they should from this investment? Maybe not. For example, in 2002, California had an average number of eligible children approximately three times the number in Illinois. The same year, California claimed ten times as much under IV-E Training as did Illinois, more than \$76 million (32 percent of total federal claims and 23 percent of eligible children). Despite the highest training investment of any state, California was found non-compliant on all of the Child and Family Service Review outcome indicators. Here are five reasons why your training investment may not be working and what to do about it.

### **1. You assume that your competency-based training has the right competencies.**

Competency-based training has become a common label for all human services training. But how do you know you have the right competencies? Have you seen them? Most administrators have never looked at the competency statements in their agency's training curriculum. If they did they might be surprised. In many instances the competencies reflect levels of human performance far below actual job expectations. Perhaps eighty percent or more reflect only the ability to recall memorized information. This is reflected in competencies containing learning verbs such as list, state, describe, identify and explain.

Some competencies are non-behavioral. Here the operative words to watch for may be "understand, appreciate, value and know the importance of." In other cases the competencies do not relate to learning at all. For instance the learning objective might be "watch a video" or "share personal information."

A simple and quick test is to extract all the competency statements from the curriculum. Next delete all that are verbal information (list, describe, etc.) and those that are not real competencies (understand, etc.). Now look at what remains. These are probably the higher-level performance skills in the curriculum. Do they match the job requirements? If not, people are not being prepared in training to do the actual work.

### **2. You allow your training contractor to define practice.**

Most agencies have only generally defined their practice model. To the extent it exists, it is a mixture of SACWIS screens and written procedures. By default, whoever writes the training curriculum invents the agency's practice framework. While focus groups of front line staff may be used to collect information, managers frequently do not confirm that the practice approach that's placed in the curriculum actually reflects how the work is to be done.

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Managers need to define the role outcomes for different positions. These are different than tasks. For example, what decisions are caseworkers expected to make? To what end are they expected to influence family members? These role outcomes define the job, not tasks. Tasks and related skills are the agency's preferred strategy for achieving the outcomes. Do these skills learned in training provide the necessary package to achieve the role outcomes? No agency would permit an information technology contractor to decide independently what the functional capabilities of a system will be. The same should be true of training contractors.

### **3. You assume that trainers can teach the practice you prefer.**

In recent years several states have moved to raise the training bar regarding human performance. This has exposed many trainers who can talk the talk, but not teach the walk. In other words, these states have found that trainers who could lecture and tell good war stories couldn't actually demonstrate skills in training. In some cases, states have invested considerable effort in developing trainers in the new curricula and the practice skill within them. For example, when Alabama implemented Alabama Certification Training, many of the trainers had never used several of the new practice elements in the field. To their credit, Alabama's trainers recognized this need and the state invested considerable effort to update their trainer's abilities in these areas. Some trainers do not acknowledge what they don't know and can't do. Pauline Lide, a former associate Dean at the University of Georgia School of Social Work once said, "No matter what faculty members are assigned to teach, ultimately they only teach what they know."

### **4. You fail to read your training curriculum.**

Few administrators have ever read their core training curriculum. You don't have to be an expert instructional designer to see what is missing or how something is being taught. Extensive lecture leads to verbal information and not much else. Practice activities may not develop skills unless each person gets helpful feedback. In some cases, trainers may not

know the correct answer and leave the issue up to group consensus. For example, in one instance, the trainer in a state administered system was allowing trainees to disagree about substantiation of an allegation.

In another example, one state's curriculum went to the field with the following content: The designer was attempting to distinguish between poverty related neglect and actual neglect. The trainer was instructed to say, "Parents and children eat cornbread and beans seven days a week. This is not neglect, it is poverty. Parents eat steak and potatoes while the children eat cornbread and beans. This is neglect."

Your training curriculum stands with your policy manual as the most important tool for implementing practice in your agency. Administrators should know what is in both and be certain that it is the right stuff.

### **5. You fail to look at what actually occurs in practice.**

Trainers often complain that training is not supported in the field. It is also possible that training does not adequately support practice in the field. In either case the cost of not knowing is enormous. Most agencies have no real knowledge about what is actually occurring in the casework relationship. Practice occurs out of sight of supervisors and administrators. Recent evidence suggests that in some areas supervisors are actually signing off on bad practice, questioning whether they are able to recognize poor work when it is occurring. Practice is the principle means of achieving the agency's mission and goals. Yet, beyond policy compliance, little effort is actually made to see if what is hope is actually occurring.

Experience suggests that excessive money is wasted on meaningless training and incomplete competency development. The result of this is huge inefficiency of effort in daily service delivery. The answer is not more training or more professionally trained staff. It is staff who are effectively trained to meet the actual requirements of the job. By attending to these five reasons for training ineffectiveness you can improve your agency's training investment and performance.