

A Seat at the Table

The Trainer's Dilemma

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Many professionals would like “a seat at the table” – that is, have a bigger say in important business decisions. But are they really prepared to sit at the table? And maybe, just maybe, if they knew what sitting there involved and what was required of them, they really wouldn't want such a seat. You be the judge.

A Seat at the Table: The Trainer's Dilemma

Various professionals (e.g., trainers, HR staff, OD consultants and IT staff to name a few) can from time to time be heard lamenting the fact that they don't have "a seat at the table." That euphemism refers to their wanting an increased say or level of participation in important business decisions.

James E. Lukaszewski, a leading public relations practitioner, says he spends a fair amount of time talking with and counseling CEOs and he finds their perspectives on people getting to the table quite interesting¹. CEOs ask, "How do I manage all these people who constantly yak at me, who know virtually nothing about the business or what I care about, but want to tell me how to run the business? They all clamor for a seat at the table. The place is already overcrowded with folks who don't know how to help me. Spare me these amateurs. Who are these people anyway?"

If you're one of those folks clamoring for a seat at the table, listen up; here's how to get one.

First, ask yourself questions like these:

- What would I do if I had a seat?
- What value would my presence add?
- What are my unique contributions?
- How would I have to behave differently?

If you don't have good answers to those questions then you probably don't belong at the table – at least, not just yet.

Next, take stock of your grasp of your organization's purpose, mission, operations, history, structure, strengths, personnel, politics, finances, the opportunities and threats it faces, its competitors and their relative advantages or disadvantages, its customers and markets, its key suppliers and critical inputs, its stated and manifest strategies, its reputation, any governmental and regulatory considerations, the executive cadre including their history and relationships inside and outside your organization, and anything else you can think of that I haven't included in this list. If you don't have a good grasp of all or most of those matters then you probably don't belong at the table – at least, not just yet.

Then take stock of the table itself and what goes on there. Who sits there now? What are they like? How did they get there? What do they do there? How do things work there? What games do they play and how are they played? If you don't know then you probably don't belong there – at least not just yet.

But maybe you don't really want a seat at the table. Consider this little story.

Once upon a time there was a trainer named I.M. Smart. He was very, very good. Trainees loved it when they drew Smart as a trainer and managers and execs were impressed by Smart's knowledge of business, organizations, systems, processes, marketing, IT and finance. Smart was also known for seeing past the presenting training issues and identifying underlying performance issues. Smart was also able to get others to see these same issues. Better yet, he could then find ways of addressing these issues or

¹ More of Lukaszewski's remarks can be found at http://www.talk2us.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=305&Itemid=207

of getting others to do so. In short, Smart was pretty good at improving the performance of people, processes, systems, and organizational units.

Over time, Smart drifted (or was drawn) away from training. Managers and execs were desirous of making use of Smart's abilities in areas that didn't comfortably wear the label "training" but they were not comfortable making use of a person in that role who wore the label "trainer." More and more of Smart's work had to do with performance improvement and general management consulting and less and less of it had to do with training. Smart noticed that some former peers, once trainers themselves, had also moved away from training. They, too, were in demand on matters managers and execs deemed too important or too challenging for trainers to tackle. Smart, however, always remained interested in training and maintained a relationship with the training community. After all, such were the origins of Smart's own career and he was mindful of what some might term his "humble" origins.

Smart's efforts to get trainers to understand the limitations of the label "trainer" fell short. He couldn't get trainers to see that even if they were competent in areas beyond training, and even if they succeeded in demonstrating this competency, managers' and executives' perceptions of "training" and "trainers" were not likely to change. Instead, assuming competency in these other areas could be demonstrated, managers and executives were more likely to move such a "trainer" out of a training role and into one where the managers and executives could feel comfortable putting that expertise to work – without having to scratch their heads and wonder how it was that a "trainer" was able to work such magic – or, as Smart was once asked, "Why do you go around pretending to be a trainer?"

And so Smart pondered the pointy horns of "the trainer's dilemma:"

1. On the one horn, if you're a "trainer" and you want a seat at the table, you'd better be able to go beyond matters that relate to training only.
2. On the other horn, if you're able to go beyond "training," chances are you won't be a "trainer" for long.

So ask yourself if you really want to sit there. If you do, you'd better do your homework and prepare yourself. If you do that and do it well you'll wind up at the table. If you don't, you won't and it will be business as usual – at least for now.