

Human resource management: marks and spencer



The success of any organisation inevitably depends very largely on the staff it employs. It is necessary to ensure an adequate supply of staff members that are technically and socially competent, and capable of career advancement into specialist departments or management positions. There is therefore a continual need for the process of staff learning and development, and training fulfils an important part of this process (Mullins, 2007).

This paper will look at the training function in Human Resource Management as it exists in Marks and Spencer. My perspective will be as an external observer of the retail giant's inner workings. The company's training methods and practices will be discussed and a critical review of these practices will be done in relation to theory. Strengths and weaknesses of these training methods and practices will be identified and recommendations will be made for improvement towards meeting the overall goals and objectives of the company.

1. 1 Brief Background Information on Marks and Spencer.

Marks and Spencer, one of the UK's leading retailers, is often cited as an example of British business enterprise at its best. Despite increasing competition in the high street, it is profitable, and it has an enviable reputation for the quality of its merchandise. It is also well known as a first class employer which demands high standards from its employees and in return offers unrivalled staff training and welfare facilities (Stewart, 2003).

Marks and Spencer has more than 120 years of heritage which dates back to 1884. Since then its business values have been built around five key principles which are Quality, Service, Value, Innovation and Trust (Marks and Spencer, 2010a). Based on these principles the company has grown in leaps

and bounds into one of the best retail brands in the world, employing over 65, 000 employees in 450 stores within the United Kingdom.

2. 0 Training

Definition:

Bramley (1989) states that training can be defined as “ a systematic process carried out for an organisation concerned with changing concepts, skills or attitudes of people treated either as individuals or as groups intended to improve job performance and thus enhance organisational effectiveness”.

A more recent definition is the one by (Reynolds, 2004; Sloman, 2005) which states that training is defined as a set of activities which react to present needs and its focused on the instructor rather than developing the individual and organisational potential and building capabilities for the future which learning does.

Looking at the two definitions above it is evident that the role of formal training in organisations has declined over the years between the 1980's and now. Nowadays more emphasis is placed on learning which is about developing skills (CIPD, 2009). Training which most of the time is a formal class room based learning fails to deliver efficiently as required (Garavan, 2007). Garavan, (2007) further states that organisations are recognising more and more that Human Resource Development as a tool to achieve competitive advantage has raised awareness of the importance of embracing learning as an integral part of the culture of an organisation.

It is important to state that this paper will not elaborate on the shift from training to learning but will look at the training as a function of Human Resource Management and Marks and Spencer will be used as a case study.

2. 1 Importance of Training

Despite the challenges posed by the financial downturn, majority of the firms have maintained a steady budget for training and development (CIPD, 2009).

This is because businesses require flexibility and the ability to transform rapidly because the way to survive for most companies (large and small) is to reshape their activities and re strategise in line with the needs of the rapidly changing markets. In order to make this happen, firms must be able to train its employees to adapt to the changing needs of the markets. Most organisations believe this will give them a competitive edge in the local and global markets (Edralin, 2004)

3. 0 Training in Marks and Spencer

Training programs in Marks and Spencer are designed around three key features which are;

Developing value for money products based on customer needs: Effective training of employees equips them with skills which helps add value to the products and services based on customer needs (The Times Newspaper Ltd and MBA Publishing Ltd, 2010). Example1: Well trained employees engage with customers and understand their needs. This information can be fed into market research on consumer behaviour in order to come up with products that suit customer needs.

Investing in the environment within stores: Employees trained in the area of product stock management will help to boost profitability and efficiency (The Times Newspaper Ltd and MBA Publishing Ltd, 2010). Example 2: Well trained employees on the use of the hand held terminal can help the company reduce wastage by ensuring adequate stock management which reduces costs and boost profitability.

Providing good customer service for customer retention: Well trained employees on customer service will always make a lasting positive impression on customers which brings about growth sustenance through customer retention (The Times Newspaper Ltd and MBA Publishing Ltd, 2010). Example 3: A well trained customer assistant is the face of the company on the shop floor and if he/she makes a lasting positive impression on the minds of customers this can translates into a high degree of customer retention which subsequently helps sustain or accelerates market growth.

3. 1 Training Methods in Marks and Spencer.

The method of training adopted by any company often varies depending on the objectives of the company, the trainee involved and the task to be performed (The Times Newspaper Ltd and MBA Publishing Ltd, 2010). For training to be effective, the methods adopted must suit the audience, the content of the training, the business environment, and the learning goals and objectives.

There are generally two forms of training which are on-the-job training and off-the-job training. On-the-job training takes place while a trainee carries out a real task while been supervised. An example of this is coaching

(Example 4). On the other hand, off-the-job training as the name implies takes place outside the work place. An example of this is stock management software training which might include simulation and class room based lectures (Example 5)

For the purpose of this write-up, training methods used for staff members in the stores will be considered. This is simply because the store members of staff are the face of the company in the business. A customer will only have a wonderful shopping experience if he/she is in contact with a store member of staff with the right attitude and appropriate customer service training.

According to Marks and Spencer (2010b), the majority of the training the company offers its store teams is on-the-job training. The company claims it helps teams learn in 'real life' situations, where they have the benefit of the firm's support should they need it.

Section managers in the firm also receive specific training on stock management, driving sales and team motivation skills. The store managers are usually placed on a regularly assessment programme so as to address any senior level development needs they may have.

Two training methods will be looked at in Marks and Spencer and these includes on-the-job training method (coaching) and Role play for new employees.

3. 1. 1 ON THE JOB TRAINING (COACHING)

Practice: Coaching in Marks and Spencer is a type of on-the-job training where a sales advisor or a customer assistant is attached to a section

manager. With this type of training an employee gets to see first-hand what it would be like to do a particular task. This training method involves practical learning where the trainee is engaged in the real task and is made to go through a continuous performance review program where the coach measures how much learning the trainee has absorbed. Examples of this type of training include; till training, date expired and product quality stock management training and customer service training. (Example 6, 7 and 8)

Method of Assessment: Marks and Spencer measure the effectiveness of coaching by ensuring every trainee go through a continuous performance review (CPR) where a line manager asks the employees to score themselves on a range of topics on a scale of 1 to 3 where 1 is the lowest and 3 is the highest. The employees then give two examples of every topic discussed to show the required depth in understanding and clarity. For example an employee will be asked to give an example of when he/she showed ownership and responsibility when dealing with a customer. (Example 9)

Theory: According to CIPD (2010) coaching is defined as “ developing a person’s skills and knowledge so that their job performance improves, hopefully leading to the achievement of organisational objectives”.

Although there is no meeting point among coaching professionals about what the precise definition of coaching is but there are some generally agreed characteristics of coaching in firms which are:

It is essentially a form of development that can be classified as non directive.

It focuses on improving performance and developing individuals’ skills.

Strong emphasis is placed on performance on the job but may give room for interpersonal issues.

Coaching activities are structured with both organisational and individual goals in mind

It provides trainees with feedback on their strengths and weaknesses which is essential for continuous improvement.

It should be delivered by trained people as it is a skilled activity. (CIPD, 2010)

Critical Review of on-the-job Training (Coaching) in Marks and Spencer:

Based on my experience with Marks and Spencer as a member of staff in one of the stores in London I have come up with the following pros and cons regarding coaching as a type of on-the-job training.

Pros:

Training is tailored towards employee's needs to boost the company's performance. This enables the company to put the right person on the right job.

This type of training in Marks and Spencer is highly practical and reality-based as the trainee engages in the real job under the supervision of a line manager.

It also promotes the establishment of important relationship between the employee and a coach which can be positive for team building.

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Cons:

Trainees are prone to errors and this may affect quality of customer service.

There is often a misplacement of priority as the line manager tends to focus on the trainee doing the job rather than ensure the provision of real learning for structured skills development.

3. 1. 2 ROLE PLAYS AS A TRAINING METHOD FOR NEW EMPLOYEES

Practice: Marks and Spencer use role play training method to train its newly employed sales advisors on customer service skills. The trainees act out certain roles in the context of a sales situation between a staff and a customer. The new employees are trained to display four outstanding characteristics which are determination, respect, ownership and responsibility and being positive. The objective of this training method is to enable employees reflect outstanding customer service skills when dealing with customers and these skills should be based on the business's core values of quality, service, value, innovation and trust. This routine is supervised by a skilled member of staff who is well embedded in the core values of the company. An example of training which makes use of role play is Customer service and sales development training – Example 10

Method of Assessment: The method of assessment here is the evaluation of performance through a quality service report. Every sales advisor is shadowed by a section manager during a real staff-customer transaction and he/she is assessed on all areas of service. The scores are recorded on a

quality service report sheet. The outcome of the report is explained to the employee and the results count towards overall performance.

Theory:

Today's demand for knowledge driven leadership in a changing business world calls for changes in training methods (Sogunro, 2004). Businesses can no longer rely on the traditional training methods which tend to be too slow to catch up with the pace in most industries. Unlike most traditional methods of instruction, role-playing has proven effective in many training settings (Ments, 1999). Ments (1999) also states that " role-playing accelerates acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and offers educators, trainers, and learners the opportunity to observe growth and progress in both teaching and learning transactions in a more practical way".

Role-playing has been proclaimed as an effective training method used in the upper levels of cognitive domain of learning, especially in both individual and group situations such as customer service, sales and negotiations.

Reid and Kleiner (1996) suggest that Role playing provides a strong platform for personal involvement and practical experience. It is strong in portraying the aspects of interaction among people and it is most useful in gaining insight into the viewpoints or feelings of others which is very handy in dealing with customers. Role play allows for proper group discussion and therefore stimulates active participation and feedback. It is important that role play be confined to training situations in which mistakes are treated with tolerance by both the trainer and fellow trainees. This is to ensure that reinforcement is effective (Reid and Kleiner, 1996).

Critical Review of Role Play as a method of Training in Marks and Spencer:

Role play as a method of training in Marks and Spencer has proven to be very successful over time. This is evident in the quality of service on display in most of the Marks and Spencer stores. Role play as a training method has also been criticised, especially for its demand for time, expertise, and resources (Ments, 1999). This is evident in Marks and Spencer as lot of time is spent making a single point and trainers do not always exhibit an admirable level of skill and creativity in helping the trainees learn from the situation. Sometimes only a few people get to practice while others watch.

Industry researchers have also identified role dysfunction, role conflict and role ambiguity (Cotton, 1996) as common problems in using role-playing technique in training programs. Trainees in Marks and Spencer sometimes experience role ambiguity, especially in comprehending the particular parts they are expected to play.

4. 0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4. 1 CONCLUSION

No single training method is superior to all others in terms of meeting long term organisational objectives. The content of the training material to be presented, the number of trainees on the training program, the background and ability of the trainees, the time that can be devoted to training and the objectives of the training must all be considered when determining the best method for a particular training program (Read, 1996). When possible, it is best to pick a method that encourages active participation by the trainee and provides adequate feedback. This increases the likelihood that what is

taught in training will be retained and later applied practically on a real job situation.

No matter the type of training method adopted effectiveness is measured by comparing the benefits of the training to the training costs. Benefits like increased productivity must exceed the training costs. Measuring the trainee behaviour after training also indicates how well the information learned is transferred practically to the job because for training to be beneficial to the company, it must be applied to the job. This transfer is dependent on both the training and the work environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Marks and Spencer identify specific training needs based upon the technical skills and business competencies for each role. This is a very good way of aligning training contents to specific organisational objectives but this is not enough when the long term organisational effectiveness is in question.

Employee development should always be put into consideration when designing a training method. This is not the case with Marks and Spencer because there is often the case of the coach shifting focus from the trainee to the actual task at hand. This often defeats the main purpose of training which is learning and development. Please find below my recommendations on the two training methods based on the above point.

COACHING

Coaching should be designed for trainees to close the gap between their present and desired levels of performance. This will give a clear indication of any form of learning and development.

The performance appraisal of all trainees should be designed to identify any form of strengths and areas that need improvement.

Trainees should participate in Role plays, case studies, and business games from time to time to put into practice whatever they have learned during training. This will further identify further training needs or an indication of competence.

ROLE PLAYING

Based on my experience in Marks and Spencer, role play has proven to be a useful tool in fostering understanding of how to handle important real-life situation. It has also been criticized by trainees and trainers of been time consuming and lacking of skilled trainers to oversee the exercise. When this happens there appears to be role dysfunction, role conflict and role ambiguity amongst the trainees. The following recommendations are made to enhance the effectiveness of role play for organisational effectiveness.

Marks and Spencer should invest in constant training of the trainers so as to maintain the required level of skill needed to oversee an effective training using role play.

The number of participants in a role play should be reasonable for effective management.

Trainees should be given a constructive feedback immediately after a training session.

The trainee's present jobs and capabilities should be taken into consideration during the role play so as to measure any form of improvement.