

WHY PEOPLE SKILLS ARE STILL BEING TAUGHT AT WORK

How and why would a “soft” skills voluntary training course hold up for decades in a wide diversity of organizations, corporate cultures, and in a constantly evolving workplace? Three human resource veterans in different states who have never met, answer these questions, while sharing their experiences and opinions on workplace trends, changes and sameness.

Back in 1981, Janice Sutcliffe, then Asst. V.P. of Training & Development for the 1000-employee, Alexander Hamilton Life Insurance Company in Farmington Hills, MI, introduced a training program to employees which taught them how to:

- set goals, priorities and plans of action
- feel empowered and boost self-esteem
- counter negativity
- resolve conflict
- build strong relationships and monitor reactions

The course was offered voluntarily to every new non-management employee for the 12 years Sutcliffe was employed with the firm. After nearly 40 years--although Sutcliffe has since moved on--Alexander Hamilton is still using the program.

In 1993, Sutcliffe brought the course with her to BBD&O Advertising in _____, Michigan, where she was V.P. of Support and Staff Management. Then in her position as Manager of People and Organizational Development at the 300-employee, Society of Manufacturing Engineers, in Dearborn, MI, she took the course with her again..

Years ago in Minneapolis, MN, Amelia Lanier employed the identical “people skills” course for management and staff employees at the former 350-employee LifeUSA Insurance Company. In 1999, when the 700-employee Allianz Life Insurance Company of N.A., merged with LifeUSA, (assuming assets of \$21.4 billion) an important and saleable part of the acquisition package was this same off-the-shelf training program. The course was used for all new employees.

Down south in Galveston, Texas, Ladona Landry, Human Resource Consultant for the Organizational Development Training and Recognition Department at the University of Texas Medical Branch, has been implementing the same course with PhD’s

Page 2/People Skills Still Taught At Work/EDSI

and MD's. She has also facilitated the course as an independent Human Resource consultant, with NASA, Fannie Mae, Federal Express and other companies for many years.

Standing The Test of Time

The course used by Sutcliffe, Lanier and Landry in all of these organizations is called [***Increasing Personal Effectiveness***](#)®(IPE), by Employee Development Systems Inc., (EDSI) in Centennial, Colorado. "IPE stands the test of time by fulfilling different goals in varied organizations over generations," says Sutcliffe. In her case, the course was being used as a foundational training tool at Alexander Hamilton, for non-management personnel. Back in '81, Sutcliffe was seeking an empowerment program, which would communicate to staff that they were valued and the company was making an investment in them.

"The course not only instills professionalism, values and good communication skills for the company's benefit, but helps with personal development as well," according to Sutcliffe. Because the company was a start-up, IPE was its first core training program. The company now offers dozens of different programs. As the parent company grew and changed, IPE was introduced and adopted by the 11-unit Training Council, made up of all affiliated Alexander Hamilton companies. "The course became so significant that it was tied into the insurance company's Job Post system," says Sutcliffe. Internal postings now note that an "IPE graduate is preferred." "Employees have increased their marketability with the course," she adds.

For Sutcliffe, the reasons for using the course at BBD&O Advertising in the early 90's were very different, yet the results were equally effective. "At the ad agency, there were problems with morale and communication," she explained. "There were not enough personnel taking responsibility for their actions, and there were clear difficulties understanding how to interact with different personality types," Sutcliffe said. Less than 100 administrative assistants were targeted. "Because this typical advertising agency worked at a very fast pace, with heavy deadline pressure in a highly competitive

Page 3/People Skills Still Taught At Work/EDSI

workplace, there was not a high emphasis on people development,” added Sutcliffe. “Because the firm was more results oriented, there was a breakdown in communication. After using the course, employees had a better understanding of their boss’ needs, a higher level of tolerance for requests from superiors, and a more effective manner for communicating their requests.”

At the Society of Manufacturing Engineers (SME), the motive for the course was also different. It was being used to help implement a turnaround by the new executive director from an autocratic to a participative management style. The course was adopted to re-train employees to understand that they have rights and choices, and to encourage them to effect changes in the company. It was one of approximately a dozen training programs at SME..

As was the case for Janice Sutcliffe at Alexander Hamilton, Ms. Lanier found IPE to be a “foundational tool” for all employees at Allianz. “Empowering employees to make choices, take ownership of actions, more effectively communicate, and be part of a team seems to be such a basic formula—but truly isn’t for many companies,” Ms Lanier believes. “I’ve also come to the realization that the ‘basics’ aren’t in-born, but need to be taught, refreshed and practiced.”

Reaching Gen-X and Gen-Y

For more progressive companies today that are already participative in company culture, what is the appeal? According to Janice Sutcliffe, “Today’s workforce is more competitive. We’re lucky to get employees and it’s tougher to keep them especially when the economy improves. We know you have a choice of whether to stay or go. At the same time, there is a greater compression of levels and flattening of organizations, preventing employees from moving up so readily within an organization. This necessitates offering other developmental opportunities,” says Sutcliffe.

“Today’s Gen X’ers and especially the new Gen Y’ers, are the technology gurus, and fast movers, who are less satisfied and have greater expectations. They have shorter attention spans and need continuous learning and challenges. Empowerment is still

Page 4/People Skills Still Taught At Work/EDSI

needed today, but for different reasons. Fifteen years ago we needed to acknowledge to our employees that it was OK to ask for things. Now we know employees feel empowered, but they need to learn how to best temper it, by more effectively communicating, and by exhibiting less cockiness and entitlement attitudes.

Along with choices and decisions, which are the basic tools in the IPE course, come responsibility and accountability,” adds Sutcliffe. “This is the biggest lesson needed for today’s generation. Yesterday’s employees were afraid to speak their minds. Today’s employees need to learn how to soften what they say, so they don’t step on any toes. IPE teaches all of this. It holds up over time because the messages are timeless regarding choices, results and effectiveness. The work environment may change, but you’re always in control of your behavior,” adds Sutcliffe.

“Another trend today, and why IPE is still holding up, is all of the downsizing,” notes Sutcliffe. “Less people are doing more work, and so communication is even more critical in an environment where we are more stressed and staffs may be spread across the country. The course is impactful, powerful and introspective. It improves communication, morale and productivity. The level of energy and excitement it generates as well, is long lasting,” explains Sutcliffe.

Lifelong Lessons

According to Ladona Landry, many years after course implementation, one employee said, “you know, I’m still using the I statements learned in the IPE program.” Another is still using the goal and priority-setting exercises learned in the course. Yet another continues to give constructive feedback when dealing with individuals of different personalities and opinions. Others have said it has changed their lives. One employee was propelled to go on for her Master’s degree after IPE completion. Another said it personally saved her life. She was having an extremely tough time when she started the course and said it showed her she had something to offer and to live for. IPE provides a great deal of self-assessment and confidence building exercises. It teaches specific steps for how to counter negativity and resolve conflicts,” says Landry.

Page 5/People Skills Still Taught At Work/EDSI

“The bottom line,” according to Lanier, “is that a course like IPE teaches the basic skills everyone needs for work and life, and yet so few people get the opportunity to learn and implement. This course creates tremendous self-awareness. It boosts self-esteem, positively impacts retention, and significantly helps in customer relations and promotability by improving communication skills and reducing conflicts. These issues were always important to LifeUSA, but took on an even heightened importance as the company grew and continues to grow through its merger with Allianz,” adds Lanier. “None of this is rocket-science, but it seems the more technologically advanced we become, the less able we are to communicate consistently, effectively and productively,” she adds.

Aiding Today’s Technical Managers

Landry adds that “today there are too many technical people in management positions lacking the requisite interpersonal skills. This course covers the arena of emotional intelligence, helping to improve people skills. It gives individuals the tools and effective direction to improve their lives. This means something different for each person. While the program was designed for non-management personnel, I have seen many Ph.D’s and MD’s get more out of the course than front line staff,” she adds. “With management level personnel, the course covers more big picture issues and how to better communicate and improve relationships with staff (as well as with coworkers, family and friends). IPE allows you to customize examples to your audience. It’s not a canned program.”

A Common Language

According to Lanier, “the course has given everyone at Allianz a consistent approach to communication. We talk the same language now. I expect that all employees will be trained.. The faster paced we become, the more important it is to step back and hone our people skills. We all want value in our jobs and in our lives. Boosting our personal effectiveness accomplishes just that.”

Page 6/People Skills Still Taught At Work/EDSI

Landry adds, “I love teaching this course. I am renewed, rewarded, and inspired every time, because it’s never the same. The audience is always so grateful, and moved by it. You live with the employees and grow with them through this course. You don’t just go through the motions.” (Landry facilitates dozens of other courses in leadership; customer service; management certification; presentation skills; coaching; training the trainer and more.)

Return on Investment

“Leadership at each of the organizations in which I have facilitated IPE have all seen a return on their investment, says Landry. “I have piloted it with one clinic at University of Texas Medical Center and now am going to 39 others.” Landry will also be piloting long distance learning and teleconferencing of IPE at the University Medical Center.

According to Sutcliffe, “the workplace is evolving. Many training departments are now revenue generating. Upper management is realizing that it is very costly when employees come and go. We need to continually provide opportunities for them to learn and grow. When management hears the buzz created from IPE and sees the improved morale and productivity, they stand firmly behind the course.”

Implementation Options

The course is run differently according to each company’s structure and preference. Janice Sutcliffe likes facilitating it with 12 or less participants for two consecutive full days (8:30 to 4:30). “I find this makes for a dynamic, powerful setting and is very strong for relationship building. It also shows employees that you are investing time in them by taking them away from work for two days.” Ladona Landry, on the other hand, likes the course spread over eight weeks in shorter sessions, because it enables participants to immediately apply what they’ve learned and come back and discuss it each week.

Ms. Landry also says she can effectively implement the course with 12 participants or with 100, (broken out into subgroups). “There are a lot of group activities in which participants can pick a buddy with whom they inevitably form a bond.”

Page 7/People Skills Still Taught At Work/EDSI

Amelia Lanier offers the course in either two, full-day sessions or five, half-day sessions, chosen by the employee. Her courses comprise approximately 30 employees each. Other companies unable to spare employees for even half-day sessions can opt for a Lunch 'N Learn™ format for 60 or 90 minute sessions over 8 to 10 weeks.

Starting With Kids

“The fact that we even have to teach these skills to adults tells me we should be starting with the younger generation. The tragic incidents happening to youngsters across the country, show we desperately need to teach conflict resolution,” adds Landry.

Sutcliffe, Landry and Lanier concur that you're never too young, or too old to learn people skills. The messages today are just as important as in generations past.

For more information on [Increasing Personal Effectiveness](#)®(IPE) and other off-the-shelf training courses, contact EDSI at **1-800-282-3374**, or log on to www.employeedevelopmentsystems.com

###

EDSI, founded in 1979, and headquartered in Centennial, Colorado, offers personal growth and development courses designed to promote behavioral change in employees, in turn, building organizational productivity. Courses are ready-to-implement, and EDSI customizes courses for specific company needs. Customers include Fortune 500 companies, as well as hundreds of small and mid-size corporations and governmental agencies. EDSI services this clientele with a national team of account managers, providing personal planning, implementation and follow-through including measurement tools for 28 courses in the categories of communication, self-responsibility, management, business writing and customer service. Traditionally, Increasing Personal Effectiveness™(IPE) is used for non-management personnel and Communicating to Manage Performance™(CMP) has been the companion course for management. EDSI can provide facilitators or companies can employ their own.