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Skills and Employment
Office of Literacy and Essential Skills

CASE STUDY INTEGRATING ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR SUCCESS FundyPros Specialty Construction

Key Facts and Information

Name of Program: FundyPros' School of Excellence

Issue: Trades people were being promoted to supervisory roles because they had the technical skills and talent to do the job, but they did not possess the necessary essential skills to be effective managers

Objective: To build the leadership capacity of the company's 30 supervisors across the province by supporting them to develop their essential skills

Essential Skills Addressed: Reading, writing, document use, numeracy, computer use, thinking, oral communication, working with others, and continuous learning

HRSDC's Tools Used: Organizational Needs Assessment

Other Tools Used: Construction Sector Council's Competency Matrix Chart

Summary

An essential skills training program was launched at FundyPros Specialty Construction firm in New Brunswick to help build the capacity of supervisors within the organization by supporting them to develop the skills needed to succeed in their jobs. To create a positive learning environment that would foster an appetite for **continuous learning**, founder and president Mario Allain engaged employees at all stages of the program's development and implementation.

The training program helped each supervisor to develop a variety of essential skills required for their position including **writing** and **computer use**. By including familiar workplace documents in the training, participants were able to see how what they were learning related to their tasks and responsibilities on the job.

There have been many benefits to both employees and the company as a result of the on-the-job training program such

WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL SKILLS?

The Government of Canada has identified key literacy and essential skills for the workplace. These skills are used in nearly every job and at different levels of complexity. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to keep pace with their jobs and adapt to workplace change.

as improved morale and increased productivity. However, Mario Allain admits to facing challenges such as obtaining buy-in from employees and carrying financial costs associated with the training. Still, he feels that the outcomes achieved for the organization justify the investment. He hopes to extend the training program to all employees someday.

Assessing Needs

Mario Allain, founder and president of FundyPros, started an on-the-job training program for the supervisors in his company because he wanted to ensure that they had the essential skills and competencies that they need for the job. The objective of the program is to develop a culture of **continuous learning** to help employees continually develop their skills, and to help the company grow and be sustainable.

FundyPros is the largest specialty construction firm in New Brunswick with over 250 employees. FundyPros provides its products and services across the province with operations managers in Moncton, Saint John, Fredericton and Bathurst.

Mr. Allain started to hold town hall meetings with his employees around the province asking them what could be done differently to make the company more productive and sustainable. It took time for people to open up about the challenges they were facing on the job, but the feedback Mr. Allain received showed that there was a shortage of qualified workers; workers did not have adequate training, did not have enough experience, and lacked essential skills. Mr. Allain realized that what his company needed was on-the-job training. Once Mr. Allain felt that he had that crucial buy-in from his employees, he built a training facility at the office in Dieppe and hired an industrial engineer to

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act as FundyPros' training instructor and lead the training program.

Mr. Allain and the training instructor wanted to create a positive learning environment so, from the outset, they asked FundyPros' supervisors to participate in the development of the training program. Using HRSDC's Organizational Needs Assessment, they were able to identify the company's strengths and essential skills training needs. They realized that the best tradespeople were being promoted to supervisory roles because they had the technical skills and talent to do the job, but did not necessarily have the soft skills, or what they now identify as essential skills, needed to be effective managers. FundyPros decided to focus its training program on the essential skills that would help build the capacity of the company's 30 supervisors across the province.

Supporting Skills Development

The on-the-job training program is known as the "school of excellence". Being conscious of the stigma surrounding literacy, wherein it is often perceived as a black and white issue—either something you have or you don't—the training team avoids using the term "literacy" so as not to alienate those with lower skill levels. Mr. Allain is also aware of the need to distinguish between the type of learning done in school, which may carry negative associations for participants, and the kind of learning done in the workplace. He says, "I didn't want to sell the training program as if I was sending them back to school. Rather, I sold it by suggesting that we were going to elevate our own standards." There is no grading in the training because the company wants "to send a clear message that we're leaving nobody behind, and nobody fails."

All training occurs during working hours and employees are paid their regular wages. Each learning module consists of six half-day sessions because the training team found that people's interest wanes if the training session is any longer than half a day. While participation is mandatory, the training program is offered intermittently, on an as-needed basis.

FundyPros' training instructor worked with the company to develop a training program that addresses supervisors' essential skills needs and that is well grounded in their day-to-day tasks.

The Construction Sector Council's competency matrix chart is used as a roadmap for the training program. Using

the chart helped them to identify the essential skills their construction supervisors need to “understand, perform and master in order to work efficiently and effectively,” and map those skills to specific tasks.

For example, they developed a **writing** and **document use** course to improve employees’ ability to work with documents such as completing forms and reports, and requesting information. In the training, participants worked with documents that they actually use in the workplace so that they could see how the training was relevant to their work. Participants were also invited to provide feedback on the internal documents used which led to improvements in their workplace.

The company also developed a course to improve management skills and increase the capacity of supervisors when **working with others**. Its objectives are to develop supervisors’ **thinking** skills and their ability to guide and influence others to get things done efficiently and effectively, and to strengthen their **oral communication** skills by teaching them how to listen and deliver their message. The course looked at the different leadership styles used to

Participants worked with documents that they actually use in the workplace so that they could see how the training was relevant to their work.

manage people and tasks, deal with change and manage unacceptable behaviour.

Other courses helped participants to improve their **reading, writing** and **numeracy** skills. The Writing Job Procedures course helps supervisors learn how to collect and sort information, and write more effectively. The Quantity Takeoffs course aims to improve participants’ numeracy skills by working through the different ways supervisors use math on the job, for example, calculating area, labour hours and equipment needs from blueprints and specifications.

The training courses are structured and delivered in such a way as to meet identified essential skills needs on an ongoing basis. FundyPros is “always trying to evolve, to connect the dots” by integrating literacy and essential skills training into a culture of **continuous learning**.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The concept of on-the-job training was threatening to many employees who did not want to recognize that they lacked essential skills for fear of jeopardizing their jobs. It took Mr. Allain many years to make a cultural change in his company and to convince his employees that they were not putting their jobs at risk by admitting they could benefit from improving their skills. He worked to show them that developing skills is a worthwhile goal for everyone and not necessarily an indication of weak performance.

Although Mr. Allain worked to foster a positive learning environment, not everyone was willing to participate. Despite his assurances, several supervisors chose to step down rather than take part in ongoing training. Mr. Allain explains that the best individual performers are promoted to supervisory positions, but not everybody wants that job. “You have to be careful who you promote. You can scare them away but most of them grabbed on and soared. Now they want to learn more.”

There have also been financial challenges in implementing the on-the-job training program for literacy and essential skills. While FundyPros has received some funding from the Government of New Brunswick, a great deal of time and effort is required to obtain this funding which covers only a small portion of what FundyPros has invested in developing the program, delivering ongoing training and paying employees while they are off the job site and in training.

Mr. Allain admits that it is expensive to maintain a learning culture within the company but that it gets easier to develop and run the training programs once you have invested in building the structure. FundyPros started training on a three month trial basis and has now been running the program for three years. Mr. Allain feels that the impact of the training has been great enough to warrant the investment. “You really have to believe it is worth doing; I was going to do it with or without government help.”

Outcomes and Impacts

The on-the-job training program has been beneficial for both employees and the company in many ways. Participants’ self-esteem and confidence on the job has increased. The training really brings people out of their shell, “from the back of the room to a shining star in the company.” The training has created a positive attitude and atmosphere at work. There are fewer human resources issues, more respect between workers and more integrity in the company. There are also fewer work-related issues on the job. “Operations managers are doing their job better. They’ve seen it in class so they’re more comfortable at work.”

Area managers, many of whom had few or no computer skills, participated in a **computer use** training course and now they each have a laptop on site with them. This helps operations considerably in that they are now able to immediately communicate needs from the site to the office by email and can use software programs to obtain more efficient, accurate and standardized job estimates and costing.

“FundyPros has helped me evolve professionally and understand the importance of sharing with employees to achieve success.”

Area manager/learner

Benefits For Employers

- Enhanced employee engagement
- Increased productivity

Benefits For Employees

- Improved morale / self-confidence
- Improved teamwork
- Increased job opportunities

With their improved **writing** and **document use** skills, employees have learned to complete documents related to health and safety, which has allowed FundyPros to become certified by the New Brunswick Construction Safety Association.

Mr. Allain has many plans for the future of the on-the-job training program at FundyPros. At the moment, the company is training mostly supervisors, but he would like to be able to expand someday to provide literacy and essential skills training to all employees. Mr. Allain would also like FundyPros to have its own facility for technical training since many employees do not have the necessary training when they are hired. These plans would require a large investment. For now FundyPros will continue to develop training programs to meet the literacy and essential skills needs of its supervisors.

Use as a Model

Mr. Allain feels that FundyPros’ training model could be adapted to any company, whether it has three employees or 300; however, he notes that there is not just one recipe for success. Each company has to conduct its own organizational needs assessment and design its training to meet those needs. The key element of success is for the owner to be committed to a culture of **continuous learning**—he or she must be willing to invest in the company’s employees and must understand how training and improving literacy and essential skills will make the company more productive and efficient.

- KEY INGREDIENTS TO SUCCESS:**
1. Organizational needs assessment
 2. Customized training program to meet identified needs
 3. Owner who champions continuous learning

The quality of instruction and the learners' level of engagement are other key elements in the success of this model. Mr. Allain says, "You have to train the trainer, and train them well." When FundyPros first started doing on-the-job training, Mr. Allain was doing the training himself, which did not work well.

"People need to be able to connect what they are learning to the real world."

Mario Allain, President

"I just wasn't the right person for this role," he says. Mr. Allain believes that learning is about interest and involvement. "If people don't believe they can achieve something they won't try, or even show up. We noticed this when we first began the training program. People need to be able to connect what they are learning to the real world."

Mr. Allain would like to see every company invest a certain amount in training at all levels. "We have a career. We're not just drywallers; we build homes, hospitals, and communities... I had issues with qualified workers and a lack of opportunity for training, so my long term strategy to grow [the business] is to help guys to develop skills, keep them engaged, empower and enable them."

Practical Tips to Help You Get Started

1. **Establish a network of partners that can help you to succeed.** Check out **Developing Partnerships to support Literacy and Essential Skills** for more information.
2. **Learn about resources available to assess essential skills needs and support skills development.** You can find free profiles, quizzes, checklists, workbooks and more on the **HRSDC website**.
3. **Create an action plan. Taking Action: A Guide** introduces a seven step process for developing and integrating essential skills training in the workplace. From performing a needs assessment, to selecting training techniques, and carrying out an evaluation, this guide can help prepare you to embed essential skills in your organization.

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Cat. No.: HS18-25/2011E-PDF

ISBN: 978-1-100-19350-2

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