

Five Organizational Development Initiatives that Cost Almost No Money

....with suggestions on how to do them well

by Mark Frein, Managing Director with the Refinery Leadership Partners Inc.

It might seem strange for a consulting firm to offer suggestions on how to develop management and leadership abilities in organizations and spend nothing ...or at least very little. While we do certainly want to engage with clients, we also want industry in general to get as smart as possible about development. It only benefits our practice. We design and deliver amazing developmental experiences, yet the *responsibility* for the development of people cannot be outsourced. We win if our clients recognize what we can do; what they can do themselves; and what role they must play in fostering a good learning culture within their organization.

I would imagine that many readers of this newsletter have tried some or all of the concepts below. If you have others, send them in, and we will post them as a top 10, 20, 30 list on our blog. <http://refineryleadership.wordpress.com/>. My purpose in providing the suggestions is to explore what learning in an organization really is, and what it can be.

1. Have everyone read something *really* interesting

By *really*, I mean something that is not a typical leadership guru or management trend publication. McKinsey and Co. dropped copies of Jared Diamond's Pulitzer Prize winning book "*Guns, Germs, and Steel*" on all their consultants' desks. There are some very good books on business out there, but there are also many fairly empty and unchallenging reads. McKinsey picked a book that challenges assumptions, opens the mind, and makes one think. As well, Diamond's book contains many gems that can be related closely to the world of business. There are many such books out there. I would be happy to recommend some as well. Beyond just reading a good book, getting together to talk about or creating some virtual space to discuss the book adds to the value. However, the simple act of reading a mind-stretching book together can create good synergies and spark good conversation and creativity.



2. Attend something artistic together

Similar to #1, theatre; good cinema; and artwork are all forms of creativity that can inspire, challenge, and entertain us. Get a team or even a small firm together to attend something artistic, and then spend some time talking about it. If I were to chose a movie or piece of theatre, I would likely choose something that explores ethical issues. I remember showing Spike Lee's film "Clockers" to a group of students to explore questions of ethics. Like in Lee's more famous film – "Do the Right Thing" – he explores questions of leadership, choice, ethics, and decision-making in the film "Clockers". All of these topics are hot on the minds of business people these days, and most of the commentary in standard business media tends toward platitudes and aphorisms. Engage your people in something that presents a problem *without a clear solution*.



3. Play a game together

Everyone has likely been to corporate barbecues in which employees play softball, hockey, or another sport. Those are all fun things to do and occasionally do create good team and organizational bonds (although I've seen just as many resentments develop from corporate barbecue team sports).

In the literature of organizational culture, we call such things "rites of integration". For a change, try bringing in a board game, or even a video game, for a team. One of the interesting things that happens when people play games together is that they are forced to learn. If it is a competitive game, they must learn to "adapt to the competition". If it is a cooperative game, they must learn to "play well with others". We often use the Nintendo Wii with clients for developmental purposes. The trick is not just to encourage play, but to think about, and then talk about what happens when we play and what we can learn about doing working more effectively by playing together. Many of the custom simulations we develop for clients have their roots in strategic board games and there are plenty of good ones to pick from.

4. Teach each other

Once per quarter, all our consultants come together for a Development Day. During this day, we focus on teaching each other. It is one of the few things that I hold sacred as Managing Director at the firm. The concept is that we practice teaching and learning from and with each other, to deepen our individual and collective craft. I have often thought that many organizations miss wonderful opportunities to put some simple structures in place to encourage development by and for themselves.

In addition to being a great way to develop communication skills, there is no better means to deepen one's knowledge of something than to have to teach it to others. Not everyone is a talented teacher or facilitator, but encouraging employees to try is a great way to engage them and create an interesting new challenge.



5. Feedback seeking process

We have worked with clients on occasion to design and develop custom 360 processes, or custom feedback-generating activities. Yet this need not be a formal or expensive process. And, it need not be about “performance” or even treated too seriously. It can be as simple as a period during which employees exchange notes on something they noticed another person do that inspired them. Organizations that are truly continuously improving, make feedback cultural, not occasional. The idea of a once per year performance review becomes as ridiculous as the concept of a once per year review of the current financial health of the organization. Like a Financial Statement, a formal performance review may be an important part of organization process and accountability. We care continuously about financial health and we ought to care continuously about growth and development of employees. The more an organization can do to foster regular ways to give and receive feedback, the more it can become part of the culture.

These ideas do share a few things in common – they are aimed at expanding knowledge, challenging assumptions, and encouraging links between individuals. Almost any activity that accomplishes these three things is, in my opinion, educative.

Some organizations approach the development of people as something that occurs, conceptually, “outside” the bounds of the organization. In the same vein, some organizations see training, development, and education as something that is done “to” their people.

We would recommend changing the paradigm on learning. Learning is as much something done *within* an organization and *between* people.

Even further – learning is a primary vehicle for the development of excellence in an organization; the kind of excellence that leads to better execution, more money, etc.

I’m not worried about being put out of business because organizations take development seriously, and teach themselves. I’m worried about organizations not seeing the value of serious learning, and not taking the responsibility for growth and development of their people.

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