

The Learning Academies@SHSU

By Cindy Bradfield and Thieme Bittick

Learning and professional development are key to any good organization. Research has shown that employees who are given opportunities to develop new knowledge, skills and abilities are more engaged, happier at work, more change-ready and more committed to their jobs. Providing opportunities for your workforce to learn, grow and gain new skills and competencies helps create an agile, adept, forward-thinking organization — traits that are especially critical in today's higher education landscape.

So what do you do if your institution doesn't have a professional development program or if your existing program has flatlined, is stale or doesn't align with your institution's mission, vision and priorities? Maybe it's time to reevaluate, revamp or rebuild. No doubt, building a professional development program from the ground up is daunting, but it can be done ... no matter an organization's size, budget constraints or manpower. Here's how we did it at Sam Houston State University.

The Need

Sam Houston State University (SHSU) had never had a professional development program for its 1,200-member staff. Aside from mandatory compliance training, staff had no other formal opportunities to build their knowledge, skills and abilities. Realizing this was detrimental to the university in myriad ways, human resources in early 2013 began discussions on what a professional development program might look like, what it would take to create it, and how it could be implemented. From these discussions, we determined we wanted a program that would ensure proactive legacy planning by growing the workforce for the future and enhancing core competencies for the present. But first, we needed to determine what those core competencies would be and how we could align them with any learning offerings we provided.

Identifying Core Competencies

To establish a list of core competencies and a curriculum that would train for those competencies, we met with focus groups to conduct a needs analysis. Invited members consisted of staff and management from every department. The results produced categories of identifiable training needs, which we then targeted, prioritizing key areas of

opportunity to close the gap between where the university was and where it wanted to be.

The results of this process became the foundation of SHSU's core competencies for managers and staff. SHSU staff are expected to be: 1) committed to the university's vision and mission; 2) innovative in thinking and doing; 3) effective communicators; 4) accountable for themselves and to others; 5) dedicated to lifelong learning; and 6) efficient in operations. In addition to possessing all six competencies identified for staff, managers are also expected to: 1) support the university's strategic plan; 2) provide leadership; 3) empower others; 4) comply legally and ethically; 5) manage performance; and 6) build trust. All of these core competencies include specific examples of what each means.

With the core competencies identified and defined, we created a plan to use these competencies as the foundation for our professional development program. University administration then established an annual minimum requirement for professional development training (eight hours for staff and 12 hours for managers) and added it as a factor in the formal performance appraisal.

Now it came down to brass tacks — building the program.

Learning Academies@SHSU

We built two Learning Academies around the core competencies, using benchmark organizations and the training needs analysis as a blueprint. The Learning Academies consist of seven core courses for the Management Academy (for managers) and seven for the Training University (for staff). The academies make use primarily of volunteer subject matter experts and faculty at SHSU to minimize the cost of the program.

Additionally, we acquired an e-learning library from an online training vendor to mirror and extend the offerings of the curriculum for employees who wished to enhance their core competencies but who were unable to attend in-class training courses. Each class offered, whether through the Learning Academies or online, is worth a designated number of credit hours. Once an individual completes a class, the class and credit hours will automatically be added to that person's transcript in SHSU's online talent

management system. To market the Learning Academies, we hosted several “town hall” meetings on campus, created print materials to distribute across the university and utilized online outlets to get the word out. We also enlisted the support of the president to record a video introduction to the first Management Academy session in order to demonstrate buy-in at the highest levels and generate excitement for attendees.

Management Academy

SHSU’s Management Academy is designed to enhance effective leadership by offering new managers a well-rounded introduction to supervising; providing experienced managers with solid refresher training; providing all managers the opportunity to close skill gaps and network with other managers on campus; and giving up-and-coming managers the chance to hone their supervisory skills. The courses are not generic management courses, but rather are tailored to managing at SHSU, and all are tied to specific core competencies. Some of our Management Academy classes include:

- E-Colors Awareness for Teams – In this combined Training University/Management Academy class, managers are encouraged to bring their teams to learn about personality preferences, identify ways to work more productively with employees who have different behavioral styles than their own, and learn how to use personality preference awareness to reduce conflict and increase efficiency in the workplace.
- Foundations of Management – Managers hear from a panel of SHSU’s senior leaders who are new to the university or have recently taken on new leadership duties about the lessons they have learned from managing in a new culture.
- HR for Non-HR Managers – In this class, senior HR managers discuss key topics that all managers need to be aware of in today’s workplace and introduce participants to subject matter experts in each area that they can go to for answers and assistance.
- Project Management for Managers – A crash course in leading a team through a major project.
- Managing Legally – Managers learn about the current “litigation landmines” and how to avoid them; how to identify behaviors and actions that may lead to discrimination and sexual harassment complaints and how to prevent them; and

An Award-Winning Program

Sam Houston State University has been recognized by *The Chronicle of Higher Education’s Great Colleges To Work For* survey for the second consecutive year in the category of Career/Professional Development Programs. Additionally, the SHSU Learning Academies was the recipient of the Texas Higher Education Human Resources Association’s Innovation Award in 2014 and a nominee for CUPA-HR’s 2015 HR Innovation Award.

appropriate management conduct that can reduce or eliminate legal problems.

Training University

The goal of Training University is to maximize employee potential by helping staff prepare for the next level of their career, expand current skills and knowledge and fulfill their annual professional development requirements. Training University classes include:

- Generations - Understanding Your Student Workers – Explores how to work with and/or best manage student workers to develop their full potential and effectively meet the department’s needs.
- Managing Change and Building Resiliency – An exploration of the different kinds of change, how to deal with change and how to build resilience for the future.
- Project Management for Non-Project Managers – An introduction to and overview of project management.
- Written Communication Skills – Participants learn how to avoid the most common errors in business writing and gain tips for writing for different audiences.

Raising the Profile of HR

The Learning Academies project was a strategic effort on the part of human resources from the outset. By linking the newly-developed core competencies and professional development program to the university’s mission, vision, values and goals, we demonstrated our ability to think and act on a “big picture” scale and to contribute in a very

concrete way to the betterment of the university and its people. The program has laid the foundation for future career pathing, which will tie the program to compensation and classification and to the development of individual training plans for all staff employees.

As a result of the program and our role in creating and driving it, the value of the HR function has increased. Managers are beginning to recognize HR as a repository of expert advice and are beginning to contact us to ask how to go about tasks such as giving constructive feedback to an employee beforehand versus waiting until there is a problem. Instead of being seen primarily as the place one goes to get one's hiring, benefits or retirement completed, HR is increasingly seen as a proactive advocate of the education community. Increasingly, if a department has questions about the value of external training or what opportunities are available for professional development for their staff, they call us first to ask advice.

A Need Met

"If you build it, they will come" might sound cliché, but it rings true in this case. Since the program began in February 2014, 789 individuals have attended one or more Learning Academies classes, and 756 individuals have completed or are in the process of completing one or more online courses. Most of the in-person classes offered are filled to

capacity, often with a wait list. Networking and information sharing with colleagues across campus has increased, as has employee engagement, with employees actively pursuing professional development opportunities.

Prior to spending their time or resources on training, employees will frequently call HR and ask if the training will count toward fulfilling their professional development requirement, as training that fulfills the requirement is seen as a value-add. In addition, employees are starting to ask questions regarding career development and requesting advice on how to better position themselves for their long-term career goals using the development opportunities available to them.

By formulating an efficient, practical, mission-linked plan for professional development and career growth opportunities for SHSU staff and gaining buy-in at all levels of the university, HR was able to initiate, and continues to drive, culture change around learning and professional development .

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Building Higher Ed HR Competencies With CUPA-HR's Learning Framework

As HR professionals, in addition to creating opportunities for learning that will help our institutions' employees build their competencies, we should also be focusing on expanding our own knowledge, skills and abilities. CUPA-HR's Learning Framework serves as a foundation for building the skills necessary for success in higher ed HR. As an organization, CUPA-HR uses the framework to drive programming and content. As an individual, you can use the framework to determine where your (or your team members') strengths lie, where there may be gaps and where a deeper dive might be required.

Learn more about the learning framework and how you can use it at www.cupahr.org.