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COACHING TALENT FOR TEAM SUCCESS

Blended learning and self-discovery are at the heart of TQL's winning playbook for L&D.

BY CHRISTINE UMBRELL

At Total Quality Logistics, L&D team members find inspiration in guiding a struggling sales representative to achievement. “That’s where coaching, rather than training, is important because we’re motivating and encouraging rather than teaching methods,” says President Kerry Byrne.

The challenge for the logistics-driven, 5,500-employee transportation and warehousing company, based in Cincinnati, Ohio, is to innovate in a competitive and highly regulated industry. Because productive salespeople continuously seek and retain a high level of

knowledge, training and development is a critical function. When TQL adds new services, employees must understand when and how to offer them to customers and carriers, what regulations govern those services, and how to use new technologies to support the

service lines. The L&D team does its part by creating learning opportunities designed to coach employees through each product launch.

“We are a company of entrepreneurs, so we feel that guiding and motivating self-starters toward achieving their own goals through a self-discovery fits better with our culture and the people who work here—rather than merely training them about the logistics industry and how to use our technology,” explains Byrne.

Positioning for a win

The L&D team took coaching to a whole new level in 2019, when the executive team tasked several departments with increasing awareness and use of the company’s new proprietary technology platform. Recognizing the portal was underadopted by customers, the team embarked on a two-phase initiative to boost awareness and understanding of the portal and its capabilities among sales reps—who were not adequately explaining the portal—and customers, who weren’t using the portal to their full advantage.

L&D professionals guided sales reps through e-learning modules and virtual and in-person training, then they created customer training via group learning and individual customer demos. This dual approach has been a big win, far exceeding expectations. Usage increased from 23 percent to 63 percent in just a few months, and scores for internal customer service, customer satisfaction, and vendor satisfaction have increased.

“The high-level demos give key stakeholders in our customers’ organizations the opportunity to form questions relevant to their specific business needs,” explains Byrne. Assisting customers while simultaneously coaching sales reps enables users to integrate customer-specific questions and needs into what they’re learning, he says. “The real success of the two-phase program lies in the fact that we create a stronger synergy between our sales rep and their customer as they learn how to use the platform.”

Creating new game plans

In addition to their coaching roles, some members of the L&D team have scouting duties—the company periodically embeds them in the department that incubates new lines of business. The incubator team helps develop each new idea and then rolls out new capabilities in TQL’s technology suite to advance the idea and execute it. L&D team members create curriculums for employees to gain a better understanding of the new business lines, how and when to sell it to customers, and how to execute sales.

That approach empowers the L&D team “to better understand the why behind new ideas and proprietary technologies,” Byrne notes, and ultimately results in more effective training for end users. “We can provide valuable feedback on how to best effect change management on every level.”

These scouts also turn around and provide feedback on how well employees are understanding and adapting the new business lines and associated technologies into their processes, which then helps the incubator team determine what to include in the next few phases of rollout.

Byrne sees many advantages to embedding L&D professionals with the incubation team. “When L&D is involved early in the discovery and creation process of an initiative, they can design a better learning experience that leads to a faster ramp-up time for employees,” he says. “Being a part of the process from the start consistently provides better results when new learning initiatives are needed.”

Building lasting confidence

Like any good coaching staff, the L&D team works closely with all TQL “players” to keep them at the top of their games. Every six months, the team meets with subject matter experts and department leads to make sure information is up to date. “They also solicit feedback from users on a continual basis to ensure employees are receiving the training and support they need to be successful,” explains Byrne. In addition, L&D professionals are in constant communication with company leadership so they’re prepared for any corporate-level changes.

The L&D team guides employees in achieving small victories as they advance in their careers. “A win can mean something different depending on the initiative,” says Byrne. “For example, for our leadership trainers, a win would be increasing coaching effectiveness from those up-and-coming leaders. For our two-phase platform training program, the increased usage of proprietary technologies by our customers was our win.”

The learning team offers targeted educational opportunities designed according to positions. For example, sales candidates can partake in job shadowing, and IT professionals may complete accredited apprenticeships. Each sales support department has a custom training pathway that is a combination of industry- and job-specific training.

Leveraging a blend of learning programs and protocols is paying off for TQL. After transitioning some of its employee education from live, instructor-led training to an online curriculum, the company has realized instructional and process efficiencies that have saved nearly \$4 million. In addition, the firm now provides a more in-depth training program to a greater number of employees.

As the L&D professionals coach employees to attain greater knowledge and achieve more, TQL becomes better positioned as a winning company, says Byrne. “Our L&D team ensures we can provide best-in-class service to our customers and carriers by keeping our knowledge and skills up to date.”

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