

A Seat at the Table

The Trainer's Dilemma

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Many professionals would like “a seat at the table” – that is, have a bigger say in important business decisions. But are they really prepared to sit at the table? And maybe, just maybe, if they knew what sitting there involved and what was required of them, they really wouldn't want such a seat. You be the judge.

A Seat at the Table: The Trainer's Dilemma

Various professionals (e.g., trainers, HR staff, OD consultants and IT staff to name a few) can from time to time be heard lamenting the fact that they don't have "a seat at the table." That euphemism refers to their wanting an increased say or level of participation in important business decisions.

James E. Lukaszewski, a leading public relations practitioner, says he spends a fair amount of time talking with and counseling CEOs and he finds their perspectives on people getting to the table quite interesting¹. CEOs ask, "How do I manage all these people who constantly yak at me, who know virtually nothing about the business or what I care about, but want to tell me how to run the business? They all clamor for a seat at the table. The place is already overcrowded with folks who don't know how to help me. Spare me these amateurs. Who are these people anyway?"

Well, if you're one of those folks clamoring for a seat at the table, listen up; here's how to get one.

First, ask yourself questions like these:

- What would I do if I had a seat?
- What value would my presence add?
- What are my unique contributions?
- How would I have to behave differently?

If you don't have good answers to those questions then you probably don't belong at the table – at least, not just yet.

Next, take stock of your grasp of your organization's purpose, mission, operations, history, structure, strengths, personnel, politics, finances, the opportunities and threats it faces, its competitors and their relative advantages or disadvantages, its customers and markets, its key suppliers and critical inputs, its stated and manifest strategies, its reputation, any governmental and regulatory considerations, the executive cadre including their history and relationships inside and outside your organization, and anything else you can think of that I haven't included in this list. If you don't have a good grasp of all or most of those matters then you probably don't belong at the table – at least, not just yet.

Then take stock of the table itself and what goes on there. Who sits there now? What are they like? How did they get there? What do they do there? How do things work there? What games do they play and how are they played? If you don't know then you probably don't belong there – at least not just yet.

In their quest for a seat at the table, most trainers will be taken by surprise when they encounter a set of circumstances that presents them with the pointy horns of a dilemma.

Assuming trainers can do all the things that would earn them a seat at the table, they would find that their new colleagues are uncomfortable with having a "trainer" sitting at the table, even one who was thoroughly business savvy and who could consistently work magic by way of improving the performance of people, processes and the organization. Any trainer who can do these things would soon be moved

¹ More of Lukaszewski's remarks can be found at http://www.talk2us.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=305&Itemid=207

out of training into some more appropriate position and role and given some more suitable title. In the military, this move would be from a staff to a line role.

Here, then, is "the trainer's dilemma:"

1. On the one horn, if you're a "trainer" and you want a seat at the table, you'd better be able to go beyond matters that relate to training only.
2. On the other horn, if you're able to go beyond "training," chances are you won't be a "trainer" for long.

So ask yourself if you really want to sit there. If you do, you'd better do your homework and prepare yourself and that preparation includes preparing for a major change in your professional identity. If you do that and do it well you'll wind up at the table. If you don't, you won't and it will be business as usual and you will still be a trainer – at least for now.