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Austin Business Journal:

Employer Running Workers through the Ropes in Training

D. Ann Slayton Shiffler Reprint from The Austin Business Journal

Are you a Steady Yellow or a Cautious Blue? Or could you be a Directing Green or an Interactive Red?



At Amil International, employees can show their true colors as part of their training. As part of their training, they complete a personal profile course called DISC that enhances team communications and gives them a better appreciation of the strengths each brings to the company.

"You really had to do some soul searching to figure out who you are and who you are dealing with and how you can work with them better," says Terri Bennett, vice president of sales and marketing for the health care company.

The DISC course is just one of a range of innovative and forward-thinking professional development courses that companies throughout Austin use to enhance communication and productivity among their employees.

"DISC is a personal profile system that allows employees to understand each other's goals and fears," says Ellen A. Miller, proprietor of Team Performance, an Austin-based professional development firm. "It allows you to observe, measure and validate."

Through the course, employees learn whether they are a Directing Green, whose goal is personal control and who fear being taken advantage of, or an Interactive Red, whose goal is social influence and who fear social rejection. They can find out how to work with the Steady Yellows, whose goal is stable relationships and who fear loss of stability or too much change, or the Cautious Blues, whose goal is to be accurate and who fear criticism.

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"Yellows and blues are slower in their pace in a team environment, because they focus on quality," says Miller. "The Yellows and Blues often become upset with the Reds and Greens because they think they take things too fast. There's not right or wrong but knowing who is who and appreciating the different strengths we all bring to the table."

Bennett says the course gives her company's employees a better understanding of management styles and reactions to different situations.

"It has helped both the employee and his or her manager to understand each other's reactions, and it also helps the person who wants to make some changes in the way he or she does things," says Bennett.

When you consider the average manager spends 13 percent of his or time resolving staff conflicts, according to Miller, it's not hard to understand why more and more companies are enrolling in programs that enhance communications and productivity.

"I see a trend toward more innovative professional development programs," says Miller.

Employees at Amil International are required to spend 21 days a year in some type of professional development course or experience. According to Bennett, the company spends more than \$2,000 per employee on professional development.

"It's a commitment to the company," Bennett says. "We believe if we commit to employees, we have committed to the company. If we can help them grow and become better human beings, success will come."

Bennett says Amil is committed to employee training by charter. Each year, employees participates in the Amil 20/20 program, which focuses on preparing employees for the year 2020 and gives them greater vision in doing their jobs.

Every quarter, the company purchases a book for each employee to read.

"After we have all read the book, we divide into teams and discuss the book we have read," says Bennett. Books that Amil's employees have read and discussed include "Moment of Truth" by Jan Carlzon, "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" by Richard Bach and "Re-engineering the Corporation" by Michael Hammer and James Champy.

Experiential learning is another concept in which Amil employees have discovered success, according to Bennett. At a local ropes course, the company's employees have solved physical problems and stimulated trust and team building by actually going through an obstacle course that makes use of ropes.

"The ropes course is a great team-builder," Bennett says, "and it helps reinforce the intellectual learning we have been through."

In Austin, the ropes course or team spirit course is often recommended, according to Miller. The course, which Miller has set up at Lake Travis, is designed to build trust, communication, leadership, planning and team spirit.

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"The crux of the ropes training course is the games you play at work mirror the games you play in the rope activities," says Miller. "It allows you to debrief back to the workplace. How did communications break down? It's a beautiful metaphor for the work place."

One of the obstacles in the ropes course involves a trust element. Participants are asked to fall from a platform and trust that a colleague will catch them.

"Trust is not something you can lecture on," says Miller. "You have to embrace it."

Miller works with a variety of companies in Austin providing a host of professional development courses. She does an intense four- to six-week course designed to enhance customer service attitudes and gives a popular workshop called "Measuring and Managing Your Stress."

"This course gives you a personal snapshot of where your stress areas are and what to do to be more effective with them," Miller says.

Whole Foods Market, Trimble Navigation and ITT Sheraton have contracted with Team Performance for professional development workshops and seminars.

"We have seen a renewed dedication by the staff not only to reach but to exceed our objectives," says Nancy Hemati, of ITT Sheraton regarding her company's participation in the customer service program.

The UT Center for Professional Development is another resource for companies in Austin looking for professional development opportunities. In response to the global marketplace, UT's Continuing Education division has developed a range of courses for professionals who do business abroad.

"We have deliberately programmed courses to make it possible for people who have hard business knowledge to supplement with soft training regarding cultures and doing business abroad," says Mary Robertson, assistant Dean of Continuing Education for credit classes. "We have heard from people doing business abroad that some of their greatest stumbling blocks are the cultural faux pas they make."

Such courses as "Doing Business in the Arab World" and "Cultural Diversity" are popular among business people who are doing business in foreign cultures.

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For additional information on how your team can discover their potential or to arrange an appointment, call TEAM Performance at #512-836-2525 or email Ellen Miller at ellen@teamperformanceus.com.