Training Needs Analysis

(This is Chapter 2 from the Training Designer's Club ebook on Designing Great Training which can be purchased for £15 here https://trainingdesignersclub.co.uk/designing-great-training-guide/)

Assuming that your initial consultancy satisfies us that training will indeed be helpful, you can't just dive in and start pulling a course or module together. You need to resist the urge to start creating and complete a Training Needs Analysis.

In the real world, the scale of the Training Needs Analysis (TNA) will vary. However, before beginning the design process, it is vital that some form of TNA is conducted. Without it, you have no clear outcomes to work towards or any way to measure the effectiveness of your training.

It can be tempting to miss this part out, especially if dealing with strong characters who may see your analysis as a challenge to their authority. However, if you explain that conducting a TNA will help to make sure that the solution meets their needs exactly, even the most belligerent of managers should understand.

Essentially, a TNA is 'GAP' analysis, where you:

- specify the problem that you need to solve
- identify the ideal state (i.e. what the organisation/manager WANTS people to do)
- identify the current state (i.e. what is happening now)
- specify the differences between the two (clearly and in specific terms)
- identify which gaps can be addressed by training (and which need to be addressed by other means).

Let's take a look at each stage in a little more detail.

1. Specify the problem that needs to be solved

Training should solve a problem or bring a reward. Adults are far less interested in content (i.e. what they will learn) than they are in how their lives will be easier by completing the training. So the first part of any TNA should be about truly understanding what problems people face at the moment, and the benefits they will get from solving them. Alternatively, it may be an opportunity that they need to take advantage of and experience a benefit as a result.

If we understand the issues from the 'users' perspective, this provides a focus point for all the rest of the research that we do. It helps to prevent scope creep and makes sure that any training we do design will be valuable to those completing it.

2. Identify the ideal state

To identify the ideal state, you should investigate a number of avenues. Firstly, the people who spotted the need should be spoken to. What triggered them to consider training? Maybe it was feedback from colleagues or customers? Maybe KPIs or other results are below what they should be? Maybe there are going to be fundamental changes to peoples' jobs, or even to the industry? Maybe it's just a 'feeling' within the department? Understanding the background to the request is vital if you are to design the training within the context of the wider business environment.

The next stage is to familiarise yourself with best practice, or any standards that are relevant to the situation. If there are no standards, should some be created? What do other departments/organisations do? Look inside and outside the immediate environment for answers so that you have the widest range of examples to draw upon.

Make sure that you can describe the ideal state in specific terms, and challenge any vague language. Encourage stakeholders to identify specific measures, and to focus on positive outcomes rather than negative ones. Being 'better' at performance review conversations isn't helpful: Ask "What do you mean by better?" "What would people do more/less of?" "What would you hear people saying?" "What evidence would there be that a performance review conversation had been successful?

For example, "We want to improve sales by 5%" or "we want our employee survey results to go from 60% satisfied with communication to 80%" or "we want everyone to have a meaningful one-to-one with their manager once a month".

If you cannot quantify the outcomes, they can still be measurable. For example "We need all of our advisors to be able to provide basic information on all of our products, and advise on stock levels", or "We need everyone on all sites to follow our handling complaints procedure as specified".

3. Identify the current state

Again, it is important to speak to various stakeholders about the current situation. Ask for specific examples and evidence. Not only will this help you to understand the training needs more, but it can provide useful scenarios to include in examples or case studies later on (anonymised and edited of course!).

Use probing questions to challenge any assumptions or generalisations, and speak to more than one person. If you take the word of one person alone, your training is likely to be biased, or not deal with the whole situation. Using **focus groups** can be a great approach here if you can gather sufficient people at the same time. Of course, this may be unnecessary, but for company-wide training or for training to support a high-profile initiative, they can add a lot of value.

Speak to the people actually doing the job. Look at the situation through their eyes, and if possible, work alongside them for a time. What difficulties do they face? What differences exist in terms of approach? What is their ideal outcome? Taking time to understand their point of view benefits you in a number of ways: You get to know them – the language they use, what they like/dislike, the knowledge they already have etc; You can begin to see what is a training need and what is not; You find out reasons behind actions, and so can build this into your solution; and you get a new perspective on things.

Training that bears no resemblance to the organisation's reality will fail.

Finally, you should identify what already exists to help people do what is expected of them. What procedures manuals are there? What guidelines are available on the intranet or LMS? Is this information up to date? How is it accessed? What expertise already exists within the group? You may be able to use some of these valuable resources in your solution.

4. Specify the differences

Having looked at the ideal and the current situation, it should be quite easy to identify where there are discrepancies. It is then important to recommend how each of these discrepancies should be dealt with (not all will be best dealt with through training). Identify:

- What people aren't doing (but should be)
- What they are doing (but shouldn't be)
- Where there is inconsistency or confusion
- What changes are coming that people don't have the skills for?

Focus on knowledge and behaviour as much as possible. Attitude and motivation may be relevant and should be bought to the attention of the stakeholders, but working on the assumption that training is about developing competence (knowledge and skills) and confidence, focus on this as much as possible.

5. Identify what can be addressed by training

Discuss your findings and recommendations with the sponsor of the training. Be clear about what you can address through training, and what things need to be addressed in other ways (e.g. maybe different teams are being asked to do different things, or the procedures manual needs updating). Following this, you will be able to agree measurable objectives with the sponsor(s) that the training can be evaluated against at a later date (see later).

6. Stay True

It is very tempting and easy to take all this wonderful research and analysis and STILL create a programme that doesn't add value. Why? Because we generalise. It's not usually cost-effective or practical to offer personalised training. For example. A member of the Training Designer's Club had been tasked with writing a time management workshop. However, everyone's role was different. Time management WAS an issue, but those working in customer service had very different challenges to those working in IT. It became clear that instead of writing one 8-day workshop, it would be better to create four 2-hour ones, covering specific challenges: Planning and organising, handling interruptions, beating procrastination and managing monkeys. Of course, people could attend more than one, but it's unlikely they would need more than two. These more focused workshops can be supplemented by signposting useful resources, and are more likely to solve the specific problems that people face.

So, in summary...

Specify the problem that needs to be solved	Identify the ideal outcome	Speak to sponsors & stakeholders	Identify standards
Research best practice	Identify current reality	Speak to the intended audience	Look for specific examples
Understand the culture and context	Clarify what is and is not, a training need	Identify specific outcomes	Avoid generalising