



# The Next Level

## You don't need to be a CLO

to know that truly effective training is much more than sending one person, one time, to one session. It requires an ongoing commitment by the entire organization to develop each staff member. The 2006 BEST winners recognize that the performance of junior staff members is just as important as the performance of the company's decision makers.

It's this holistic approach to learning that distinguishes the 39 organizations that received BEST Awards this year. To illustrate their commitment, many of this year's winners have a dedicated learning and development team that is devoted to identifying needed skills or building a training program that enables the organization to reach goals.

All of the winners have another common trait: the desire to be the best in their market space. A heavy dose of ambition is necessary even in companies with a highly technical workforce. They are striving to improve themselves everyday—to reach that next level—which places them in a very elite category.

"As a group, the BEST Award winners share a deep commitment to learning and development, a curiosity about benchmarking their efforts against others, and a sincere desire to recognize the contributions of their learning staffs," said Tony Bingham, ASTD president and CEO. "The 2006 BEST winners set the standard for exceptional practices in learning, and demonstrate that a skilled workforce is vital to achieving business results."

There is no secret recipe for successfully integrating training into an organization. Some prefer e-learning while others utilize small classroom settings. Most of the winners emphasize training to meet an overall strategic initiative. Some winners offer continuing education in a relevant field or personal enhancement such as language acquisition.

For training to take hold, employers need to take steps to assure that new learning was acquired and require that the staff member use the training on the job as soon as possible once the session concludes. In the end, training means helping employees become better.

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## Ruby Tuesday

One of the restaurant's new commercials features a close shot of a chef lovingly placing tiny fried-onion pieces on top of a burger with a set of tweezers.

The ad campaign represents a sea change in the way Ruby Tuesday does business. The methods by which its employees create, learn, and sell hamburgers, as well as the physical surroundings where they work, all represent a new competitive spirit that is fueled by innovation and supported by learning and development initiatives.

Just a couple of years ago, Ruby Tuesday was facing negative sales and guest counts because of a change from a coupon-based marketing strategy to the launch of its TV advertising campaigns, according to Max Piet, vice president for quality execution and innovation.

"We took on the overwhelming task and heightened costs of retraining every team member, manager, and multi-unit operator on basic food and service procedures," he says. "Our goal was simple: to increase guest count by providing nothing less than flawless food and flawless service every time."

The "back-to-basics" initiative began with multi-unit operators attending training sessions at corporate headquarters in Tennessee. Those operators were then expected to provide training, coaching,

and modeling of the "flawless food and service" concept to their teams at home. Piet's staff developed weekly training activities and a communications network that was to be used by general and assistant managers. They also prepared leaders' guides and support materials for the train-the-trainer classes.

A strategic component of the initiative included empowering hourly employees, such as bar and wait staff, to make decisions that affected guest satisfaction. For example, if a customer's meal was under- or overcooked, the server could decide whether to recook it, take the charge off the bill, or offer a free dessert.

"Our stance is that their decision cannot be wrong," says Piet.

The results reveal a substantial improvement in overall service. Managers, who used to have to be consulted regarding every decision at a table, are free to run the restaurant, and employees often earn more money.

Although new locations were outperforming expectations, sales at existing restaurants were falling short. The learning and development staff determined that the problem stemmed from inadequate maintenance. The staff devised a new set of standards and communicated the new corporate philosophy of preventative maintenance. Again, multi-unit operators received training at headquar-

ters, and then transferred the learning to their own teams. The corporate headquarters bolstered the new initiative by adding \$5 million to the budget in the course of a year for restaurant repair and maintenance.

To counter the high turnover rate in the industry, Ruby Tuesday altered the nature of its training to be more prescriptive—as well as more fun.

"Formerly, we would train on objective A, then objective B," Piet explains. "Over the past three years, we have simplified our approach, attempting to get to the essence of the knowledge and build it into our culture."

Team-member training is still broad, but it is now based on assessments and can be accelerated to more advanced levels. Training materials are nearly 100 percent electronic and are delivered through in-store electronic pictorial systems called the kitchen display system and the bar display system.

All of the investment in training has paid off in terms of improved service. Positive guest comments have increased by 20 percent. Guest complaints have decreased by 30 percent. Giving more responsibility to hourly employees has increased morale and reduced management turnover by 7 percent. As a result, the company saved more than \$1.5 million on management training costs.