

Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands Briefing Update Series
Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands
Indiana University



Briefing Update

Listening Session Summary

Training & Development Trends in Select U.S. Park and Recreation Agencies

Purpose

Over time, the Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands (Eppley) has frequently been asked to provide suggestions and referrals to various agencies who struggle with planning for, adequately funding, and providing individual career advice to employees through strategic training and development. As more and more requests for assistance and training were received, it became clear that the current approaches being used by agencies were not be adequately providing effective professional development training.

As a result, the Eppley Institute investigated trends and possible solutions to the ongoing agency requests for training advice and assistance. Initial research found that training and development strategy and practices are highly desired by most park, recreation, and public land organizations, but the organizations rarely have the expertise and resources to comprehensively develop an employee (and volunteer) learning and development system. It seems that for many agencies, having a systematic approach to training, and business practices in place was the lowest priority.

To better understand the challenges facing agencies in implementing successful staff learning and development systems, the Eppley Institute sought to meet with leaders of park and recreation agencies across the nation in a series of listening sessions. The ultimate goal in this effort was to inform agencies of the challenge, and eventually to develop systems that agencies could adopt for enhanced employee learning.

Method

The Eppley Institute sent invitations to park and recreation agencies across the United States to participate in discussions during the National Recreation and Park Association Conference in Baltimore, MD. A total of 15 individuals from 12 agencies attended listening session meetings in September 2019. The meetings predominantly included directors of park and recreation agencies; however, other staff were present as well. Attendees were asked nine questions regarding the agencies' management and organization of training, existing training, the way training is evaluated, challenges associated with training, current training needs, the process for identifying training needs, and the extent to which training is tied to competencies. The answers to the interview questions were entered into Microsoft Excel by question type. The responses were coded and quantified to identify of patterns across respondents.

Overview on Agency Training Programs

Many of the agencies offer both internal and external training to their employees and several noted that their agency provides a formal orientation or onboarding process. Some agencies highlighted the decentralization, lack of organization, and consistently changing nature of the training environment, while others described training organized to allow for upward mobility within the organization. Some agencies had also established different training requirements that were scheduled monthly or annually for all agency staff. Several of the agencies noted that training was most often provided when requested, though one shared that they tried to allow equal opportunity for employees. In some cases, agencies offer incentives for individuals to participate in training and development, such as salary increases. Overall, most organizations offer a variety of training opportunities, organized to varying extents, but most training efforts were decentralized.

Internal Training Programs

Many agencies offer internal training programs. One offers their own maintenance apprentice program for construction and welding. Another offers lifeguard training internally. Most others offered internal training centered around ethical and compliance issues, including sexual

harassment, customer service, ethics, time management, and conflict resolution. A pattern of internal training being focused on interpersonal, ethical, and compliance issues emerged in the listening sessions. Overall, every respondent agreed that their agencies provide internal training, mostly related to office environment and behavior, with some offering more specialized skills through apprentice-style programs.

External Training Programs

All of the agencies use some form of external training. Some agencies, such as those that are close to training centers, have reliable access to external training through those centers. Others, that do not have access to face-to-face training locations, use online training or send their employees out for training. Skills mentioned in association with external training were arboriculture, irrigation and water conservation, wildfire management, maintenance management, and ranger training. Overall, most organizations seem to utilize some form of external training, and reserve external training for more specialized, job-specific skills, rather than office-environment or compliance-related training, which more often takes place internally.

Managing and Tracking Training

Some agencies have some systems in place for managing

training, including tracking through a centralized city or county human resources office that manages the training of a number of different organizations. Most agency personnel expressed dissatisfaction with these arrangements, saying that these offices do not really understand their agencies, or that there is some disconnect with HR because of this centralization. A significant number of attending agencies use a spreadsheet to track training required and completed by employee. One agency employed a dedicated analyst whose job it was to track training data. Overall, most agencies had some system for tracking training, and those agencies that had their own management systems seemed more satisfied with how they tracked training than those who went through a centralized city or county system.

Training Challenges

Agencies expressed challenges with upward mobility and employee attrition associated with training. Many respondents emphasized that employees are often motivated to take trainings in order to secure a promotion, and then leave when advancement is not available. Other agencies said that there is little budget to properly train and staff their parks, and that training can sometimes take resources away from an already understaffed agency. Generational differences were also mentioned, with one respondent saying that they have lost half of

their staff and that the remaining staff tend to have less than five years' experience. Another agency shared that staff who are not computer literate or struggle with English literacy are becoming more prevalent. Overall, respondents said they want to provide more meaningful opportunities for training and develop training programs that can meet their staff's needs, but that funding, staffing, and motivational issues can get in the way.

Training Needs

Responses mostly indicated that agency training was a way to move employees into the future. One agency expressed the need to focus on short-term training because employees do not want to commit to long-term training programs. Agencies expressed interest in focusing on workforce development and growing people interested in their positions, both through training and through programs in technical and two-year colleges that direct local students into their agencies. Overall, agencies think that training needs to focus more on career development, employee retention, and on building a more inclusive work environment.

Further, responses in this area were varied, and each agency has a different method for evaluating employee training needs. One agency makes a plan for training in annual performance reviews. Another convenes staff as a whole to discuss training needs. Another agency uses more of a "top down"

approach, evaluating whether there is a pattern of training needs through observation (the example they gave was customer service), and developing a training program if needed. One respondent stated that their agency has no plan. Overall, agencies seem to have plans established for assessing employee training needs; however, those plans vary greatly, from focused individual plans to more generalized group discussions about training needs.

Evaluation Approaches

Agencies have very different ways of evaluating the success of their training. One respondent said that they do not measure or evaluate the outcomes of trainings. Another said that they measure their trainings through observations of how employees engage with the public. Two organizations use quizzes at the end of training to test employee knowledge, and another uses performance evaluations as an opportunity to challenge their employees to share their skills. Overall, a third of the respondents indicated that their agency uses assessment to evaluate training, and the rest either do not assess their training or use more informal styles of evaluation like observation and discussion.

Competency-Based Training

Most respondents indicated that they would like to have a competency model that is tied to

training for career development, or that they are working toward building that framework. Some agencies have set up recurring training related to the job description, such as automated external defibrillator (AED) and blood-borne pathogen training. Only one agency shared their organization's use of competency models to make yearly plans for training, and to develop a plan for individual employees to develop their careers and prepare for upcoming job openings. Another responded that their employees are not preparing themselves through training for the positions that they want, so are not being considered for promotions. Overall, most agencies are interested in having a competency model, are currently aware of competencies to some extent, or are developing a framework.

Summary

The listening sessions and Eppley's experience responding to park, recreation, and public land agencies point toward a need for more focused, structured, and strategic employee career development and training. A reliance on volunteers and seasonal and part-time employees also creates unique challenges to building and tracking required training for most agencies. Some agencies may be able to use, and are interested in, sophisticated training approaches such as Learning Management Systems, competency-based career development, and a blending of in-house, external face-to-face, and

online learning. Identifying an overall portfolio of career development and training needs for the agency is also a practice that many agencies would like to access.

Perspective on Training Expenditures

National security, defense, and corporate and business entities invest significantly in training and development to ensure that they are capable, as an organization, of delivering essential mission services. Most training-talent professionals report training expenditures between 10 and 14% of the organization's annual operating budget.

Government agencies differ of course; agencies often struggle to budget adequate funding for training and development, or do not have a systematic business practice to determine or track training expenditures. As an example, the National Park Service, with the Eppley Institute's assistance, implemented a systematic approach to training and employee development. The result has been an agency learning expenditure goal of between 2 and 4% of annual operations expenditures.

Talent Management Best Practices to Consider

When an agency looks to improve talent, retain employees, and develop a robust training program, the real goal is the agency's "ability to sustain, innovate, and

adapt" (Vincent, 2008). This should prompt agency leadership to consider best practices and training programs standards. As Eppley assists an agency, six general best practices are implemented, including:

1. Conduct Learning Needs Analysis for Training

A Learning Needs Analysis (LNA) and Training Needs Assessment are two tools that ascertain what training currently exists in the agency, and what training is needed by agency personnel.

2. Link Training to Competencies

Competency-based human resource systems represent the industry and government standard. Competency-based training provides employees with outcome-based, learner-driven tools that help to improve their overall job performance as determined by competencies.

3. Evaluate Training for Knowledge Transfer and Impact

Know the value of training through assessment of employee learning and employees application of training to work situations. The long-term quality-impact of training is an important tool for agency long-term planning and investing in the best training for return on funds invested.

4. Develop a Training Plan (AKA Talent Management Plan)

Ensuring that the organization treats employees, one of the largest expenditure areas by

percentage of budget annually, as an important asset is critical. Having a multi-year strategy for ensuring the highest priority training needs are met first (an agency rarely can provide all the training that is needed) and that succession is considered as part of the training plan is crucial.

5. Link Training to Larger Agency Strategies and Goals

Recognizing that staff make sure that agency strategies are implemented is a common gap. The plan for facilities, parks, and revenue production seem to take center stage, while human resources and talent management are sometimes assumed to happen organically. Being deliberate and intentional is important for meeting overall agency strategic goals. This approach helps to build agency capability and capacity.

6. Implement a Learning Management System (LMS)

An LMS is essential for an agency to deliver comprehensive and strategic learning to affect organization performance and capability. An LMS allows agencies to create, assign, track, audit, and document learning that occurs in the organization.

References and Resources

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