Having the title of key account manager (or its many variants) doesn’t mean that person has the right skills for the job. For many it’s a bitter pill to swallow but the hard truth is, without the right skills, the new pharma fieldforce cannot possibly understand its customers and add the value that’s now required. Indeed, Gary Killington, director of PI Partnership, goes as far as to say it could be a “recipe for failure”.

But it doesn’t have to be. “Historically industry has had a very transactional relationship where it talks at its customers – but that just won’t work anymore. The customer base is more complex; now it’s a consultation with customers, both clinicians and non-clinicians. It’s about understanding the customers better and that means having a new skill set to add value to the relationships. Success will then come with the development of your people.”

Pharma needs to invest in its people and look at learning and development not just inside the classroom, but holistically, in order to succeed in the relationship game, says Gary Killington, director of PI Partnership.

And that doesn’t just apply to the salesforce, Killington says. It’s true of all customer-facing roles, whether it’s market access or MSLs and marketers. “All these roles will need a new approach and skill set so they can add value to the conversation. How can they market, sell or serve their customers properly if they don’t understand them? The questions we should be asking are: how do you add value to these conversations and relationships? What’s in it for the customers? What do they need from these conversations?”

So how do you go about ‘future-proofing’ your staff? It’s a tricky one, says Killington, when in-house training budgets and expertise are under pressure and there is an increased need to justify return on investment. In fact, with the rise of more specialised teams, in-house training can’t necessarily cover all bases, he says.

The value in any training in today’s environment has to be looked at holistically to ensure behaviour change, outcomes and ultimately, success, explains Killington. In short: “Success doesn’t come from one-off classroom training. You need to make..."
sure you engrain that into the real world,” and the job they do on a day to day basis.

With this in mind, PI Partnership builds its programmes to accommodate the 70:20:10 model for learning and development, which looks to maximise the learning process. Developed by the Centre for Creative Leadership, the model is based on the fact that effective learning and development is made up of just 10% from classroom study and education, with 20% coming from coaching and mentoring from bosses and managers. The large bulk of effective change behaviour – 70% – comes from on-the-job learning. “What’s really important,” explains Killington, “is understanding how to help the individual come away from structured learning and implement these skills on the job.”

What it comes down to is value. Having the wrong skills in the salesforce can be damaging but a day off the road in training can be more damaging if the new skills aren’t applied, says Killington. “Skills will be lost and money spent on training will be wasted if there is no learning journey from education to workplace. Any training needs to add value and that means having the management and support to really embed the learning, and that is one of the biggest challenges facing an up-skilling of the fieldforce today.”

This support could be anything from feedback and mentoring to leading special projects, job rotation or developing new products and services. However it’s important to understand from the outset of the training how the company expects to commit to, and support, these learning programmes in the workplace – “otherwise you haven’t received the best value from it”, says Killington. “You need to think about the training programme as a part of the learning journey rather than a one-off event. You might have a great day out training but you need the support internally to make the most of it. And you can’t expect any external business to really help you unless you are willing to support this behaviour change internally.”

‘Success doesn’t come from one-off classroom training. You need to make sure you engrain that into the real world’

Another important factor is the metrics – how do you know if you are successful? “ROI is hard to measure sometimes and you can’t measure things in total isolation,” Killington says. Key performance indicators will vary but he notes that these would be based on customer requirements, as well as the definition of success for the company.

As such, it comes down to understanding the customers, their needs and requirements – and future proofing is more effective when the training comes from people who spend a lot of time with “real-life customers”. PI Partnership, for example, has detailed feedback on fieldforce strengths and weaknesses from its In-Call Excellence programmes. This can identify first-hand the skills gaps that need to be plugged.

“Behaviour change is about looking at the complete picture,” Killington says. You must look at the ongoing learning – the learning journey – and help clients put processes in place to enable that. Learning is a continuous process that never stops. We see our role very much as change agents, ensuring change in those key behaviours that will result in effective future proofing.”

The recipe for success or failure is not prescriptive but the skills set is central. Of course products are key, Killington says, also adding that it is harder to see customers these days. “But when you see them you need to make that conversation count and add value to the interaction. It’s a smart company that maximises the value in training.”

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