

Bridging the Old and New Malden Mills: An Assessment of the Malden Mills Incumbent Worker Training Pilot Project, Phase II

August 1999

Project Overview

The Malden Mills Incumbent Worker Training Program (Project STEPS) was designed as a component of the rebuilding of Malden Mills after a devastating fire that destroyed three of their nine buildings in December 1995. While rebuilding, Malden Mills introduced new state-of-the-art automated equipment. Project STEPS was designed by Commonwealth Corporation (formerly the Corporation for Business, Work, and Learning) to retrain workers to effectively interface with Malden Mills Industries' new technology.

The project includes three skill categories that "together make up the skill set of modern process operations":

1. Process Skill Needs (handling/making goods, quality assurance)
2. Technical Training Needs (operating and maintaining new machines)
3. Basic Skill Education Needs (written and oral English communication, computer operation, data entry, etc...)

Research Summary

This evaluation summary was conducted by the Labor Resource Center and the University of Massachusetts – Boston, from January through April of 1999.

The evaluation of the STEPS program consisted of two phases, in order to best respond to the program's information needs:

- ◆ Phase I assessed the perceptions about the effectiveness of training provided by project STEPS.
- ◆ Phase II assessed the conditions in which training occurred and the impact of those conditions on the effectiveness of the training effort.

Data collection in Phase II consisted of document review, on-site observations, four focus groups and interviews with 13 individuals.

The evaluation attempted to answer the following:

- ◆ What were the program's goals, central operating assumptions or theories, and activities? How did they evolve or change over time?
- ◆ What were the program's strengths, weaknesses, and most significant outcomes as perceived by stakeholders? To what extent did the program meet, or fail to meet, stakeholders' expectations?

- ◆ What infrastructure was developed to support achievement of program goals, and what were the strengths and weaknesses of the infrastructure's capacity to develop, implement, refine, and replicate the program within Malden Mills, as perceived by stakeholders?
- ◆ How did the company environment within which the program functioned impact the shape of the program and its ability to achieve its goals?
- ◆ What lessons do stakeholders draw from the experience of developing and implementing this pilot program in the context of Malden Mills Industries?

Key Findings

Evaluators:

- ◆ To be effective, the program must have a structured funding and decision-making process in which all stakeholders are regarded as full partners in ongoing decision-making. Without such structure, differences over goals, visions, and priorities are never resolved.
- ◆ If one stakeholder lacks the means to fully participate as a partner, this stakeholder should be offered the means and opportunity to fully participate.
- ◆ The program and its stakeholders must reflect a commitment to organization-wide change and align systems with it. This includes expanding the conception of training from one primarily in terms of production.

Management Staff:

- ◆ For training to be effective, the organization as a whole has to change the way it regards the program.
- ◆ The program must be valued and this must be expressed through top-down support.
- ◆ The program should be viewed as an element of quality assurance, ensuring that input to production is consistent, measurable, validated, predictable, and controlled.
- ◆ All operators, union and non-union, should receive training to create organization-wide change.

Operators:

- ◆ Training is an ongoing need at Malden Mills – without ongoing training, quality and production will decrease as they upgrade equipment.
- ◆ The role of the union in obtaining and shaping training on behalf of its members needs to be clear to all participants.

US Department of Labor Analyst Interviewee:

- ◆ For the program to be effective, all stakeholders, and more importantly, every worker, must understand the big picture and where they fit in.
- ◆ In the future, it is important to consider the nature and future of the industry when investing public money to keep jobs. In the case of Malden Mills, textile is a dying industry.

CBWL/Project Administrative Staff:

- ◆ The union helps to embed and institutionalize the training and connect it to the day-to-day running of the firm, therefore, full-time union staff is recommended.
- ◆ Trainers, regardless of their funding source, need to be unified.
- ◆ Make sure manufacturing process is stable before doing training.
- ◆ It is important to establish consensus on outcome measures up front.
- ◆ Training should be called “production support” when initially introduced.
- ◆ The sequence of the STEPS training model works, demonstrating a good way to meet both production and employee needs.
- ◆ To be effective, the labor/management partnership needs to be institutionalized as a continuous bargaining relationship.
- ◆ It is valuable to integrate basic skills and technical skills.
- ◆ Because of their overwhelming responsibilities, more time needs to be given to replacing supervisors on the floor so they can go to training.
- ◆ To be effective, the training and training structure must be constantly re-evaluated to meet fluid business demands.

Trainers and Basic Skills Instructors:

- ◆ Generate buy-in at all levels
- ◆ Have a diverse staff with a structure and climate in which they can learn from each other and work together.
- ◆ When coming up with a program, it is important that the price to maintain it is such that when the company sees a downturn in financial situation, the project is not cut.
- ◆ Get all training staff on the machines right away. This will create a climate in which everyone is learning.
- ◆ Train supervisors first so they know the operation and the expectations of the operators in detail.