

How to Obtain and Retain ~~Personal~~ Professional Fitness Trainers

BY EVERETT AABERG

During the past 15 years, I have worked as a private contractor, served as an employee, been an entrepreneur, taken on management duties, directed a personal training staff and provided consulting and education services for the fitness industry. Yet in all these various roles I was—and still am—a personal fitness trainer first. As a result, my views on managing personal trainers come from an inside-out perspective that tries to balance the objectives of managers with the goals and needs of personal trainers. Read on to find out what I've learned that may help you develop your own professional personal training staff.

What's the secret to hiring and keeping great personal trainers? Create an environment in which personal trainers can be treated as professionals.

OBTAINING Obtaining Professional Trainers

We all wish that an experienced professional trainer with an established clientele and a team-player attitude would walk through our door whenever we needed to hire a new trainer. But, the truth is, such a scenario is rare. So until that wish comes true, you need to develop a system that will help you find the best personal trainers for your organization.

Obtaining a high-quality professional training staff is an ongoing process that often requires a complete paradigm shift by both staff and management regarding their views of personal trainers and of the auxiliary roles trainers should play within a company. I have often worked in or consulted for organizations where trainers were perceived as freelance contractors who provided only a single, specialized service. These trainers were often regarded as mercenaries who lacked company loyalty. On the flip side, I have also worked with organizations where trainers were required to wear numerous hats, doubling as sales representatives, front-desk staff, athletic assistants and even weight room janitors. With so many duties, these trainers were never seen as professionals and had little time to improve their skills. Whether trainers are private contractors or employees, their job duties must be valuable to the club and its members, while directly or indirectly allowing the trainers themselves to develop their skills and careers. To help the companies I work with appreciate the new roles trainers should have, I often substitute the term “professional trainer” for “personal trainer.” Obtaining professional trainers involves three steps: attracting, hiring and training. Each step builds upon the last, forming an interdependent system that leads directly from attracting top staff to retaining them.

Step One: Attracting Professional Trainers

So what does an organization have to do to attract high-quality, experienced professional trainers? Obviously, offering a fair compensation plan is helpful, but pay is definitely not the most important item. (For more information on what personal trainers value over straight compensation, see “Portrait of an Industry” in this issue.) Strong leadership and a professional environment are always attractions for new talent, regardless of the field. True professionals want to work alongside other professionals in an environment that provides for career and personal growth. You may be surprised to learn that standards of front-desk service, maintenance and house cleaning also impact a company’s ability to obtain top trainers. No professional is happy working in a facility with dirty locker rooms, broken equipment and poor customer service. (Think about the message these conditions send to staff and clients!) While problems of this kind may seem minor, I have actually declined consulting work with some organizations until such issues were addressed, knowing my efforts to obtain good personnel would have limited success if these concerns continued to be ignored. Sometimes, creating a more professional

environment for trainers requires change, not only in the personal training department, but also in other departments and in the systems used to promote the organization.

Step Two: Hiring Professional Trainers

When hiring trainers, I look mostly for quality people with a good educational background, a great attitude and career potential. Of course, I consider their education, certification and previous training experience, as well as their own history of exercise and resistance training. (Some of the best trainers I have were at one time clients themselves!) I also evaluate other important skills, such as previous customer service training, business knowledge and sales experience. But most of all, I search for what I call the three P’s: Are they *passionate* about training, are they *professional-minded* and are they *personable*? When people have a true passion for training, it is apparent in their thoughts, talk and actions. They love to work out and possess a strong desire to learn. You can’t keep passionate trainers away from fitness! Professional-minded people are long-term thinkers who are looking for careers rather than jobs. They already know how to look, act and talk in a professional manner, whether they have any previous training experience or not. Being personable means being able to develop rapport easily, projecting a certain level of charisma without appearing overconfident, and possessing a strong team-player mentality.

At International Athletic Club Management in Dallas, where I work, we presently use a three-stage screening and interview process. Each interviewer is a key staff member, such as an assistant director, a personal trainer coordinator or a lead trainer. The candidate must pass one interview to proceed to the next. Each interview covers all our job requirements, from passion and personality to knowledge of functional anatomy and biomechanics. The interviews become more in-depth as they progress, and a grading method is used to rate each candidate. The second and third interviewers know only that the candidate has passed the previous interview(s); actual evaluation details are not shared until the candidate has passed all three stages. The interviewers then meet to compare evaluations and make the final selection. This method is personal and nonintimidating for the candidate, yet very thorough, as it involves input from several staff members. However, the process is time-consuming because the interviews are typically scheduled over several days. Since we never know when we may need to add or replace a trainer, we make interviewing an ongoing process at our facility.

Even with a thorough interviewing system in place, hiring new employees is seldom an easy process. A candidate may have a great personality and pass each stage of the interviewing process with flying colors, but only by working with this person for several weeks will you understand his or her underlying character—and you may find this does not match well with the organization. For this reason, having a 90-day trial period complete

with successive 30-day evaluations will allow you to work out any differences before full employment status is achieved.

Step Three

Step Three: Training Personal Trainers

Training and integrating new personal training staff is drastically underrated in our industry. For example, I have worked with managers who complained about certain trainers' lack of loyalty and dedication. These managers reported having to deal with numerous issues, ranging from poor sales abilities and shoddy customer service skills to dishonesty and unprofessionalism. The supervisors were also dissatisfied with the trainers' experience, education and training techniques. On analyzing these situations, however, I found that the companies involved often had no real budget, systems or personnel in place to train their trainers. Very few personal trainers come totally equipped with all the skills required to become a top training professional. The reality is that part of obtaining a high-quality personal training staff is having the ability to *create* one yourself.

At International Athletic Club Management, new trainers receive an employee manual, which outlines several meetings and assignments they must complete before they can begin training members and accepting new clients. The trainers must learn their job requirements, the payroll system, necessary paperwork, and new-member assessment and integration techniques; they must also complete trainer-shadowing sessions, biomechanics training, equipment analysis, program design and periodization tutoring, and sales and business development training.

I find the more our existing staff is involved in the training, the better our team unity becomes and the less time the process takes from any one person's schedule. However, none of my staff receive a salary or an hourly wage for staff training, since we have no budget for this. Whenever personal trainers spend time with a new employee, they potentially lose income, since they are not training clients during that time. To offset losses, some trainers receive higher commissions in exchange for completing additional duties, including staff training.

RETAINING

Retaining Professional Trainers

Many of the qualities that first attract personal trainers to a particular organization are the same qualities that will keep them there. A professional environment, career opportunities and the presence of strong leadership are key to retention. Lose any of these components and expect to lose some staff. Retention methods fall into three general categories: development, protection and compensation.

Development

An employee's professional development begins on day one, with the staff training system, but should continue as long as the employ-

Who Leads Your Organization?

Every personal training staff I have ever worked with has included at least one trainer whom most of the others respected and new trainers emulated. If your organization doesn't have an official leader, chances are an unofficial leader will emerge. But how do you know if this unofficial leader is leading in the same direction as management? I have found that when this issue becomes a concern, it is necessary to vigorously retrain the unofficial leader, or at times, to let him or her go, in order for real progress to be made.

If you are responsible for the personal training department in your facility, it is imperative that you become or develop a strong leader for the group. You may find, as I did even after years of being the leader of several training departments, that it is better to develop a new leader than to take on the role yourself. In his book *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You* (Thomas Nelson Publishers), John C. Maxwell states that strong leaders develop other leaders, not just followers. I have found his books and audiotapes to be some of the most valuable resources I have ever used for my own growth as both a leader and a professional.

ee is working with the company. Keep in mind that top professionals will always seek professional development on their own, but the more opportunities you supply internally, the more you will keep these people at your club, where they can continue to be productive and develop loyalty among your staff. Staff development is not as difficult or costly as often perceived. Simply developing a library of resources—such as books, manuals, Internet sites and videos—will do wonders for the growth and morale of your staff. Provide occasional seminars from industry experts and offer regular continuing education meetings. These items are not too expensive and are fairly easy to implement. Encourage staff to attend quality industry seminars and conferences, such as the IDEA Personal Trainer International Summit®. Partial or full reimbursement for the cost of a conference can be offered to employees as an incentive to increase productivity or take on more responsibilities. Professional-development topics can be expanded to include seminars on business, marketing, motivation, sales and financial planning, since these are areas in which trainers typically lack training. Trading services with experts can be a cost-effective way to offer a variety of seminars. Ask your top trainers

to design and organize your professional-development program. They will enjoy choosing valuable seminars and will consequently be more inclined to buy into and support the company's professional-development program.

Be sure to provide opportunities for trainers to improve additional skills—for example, writing for newsletters and Web sites or presenting monthly lectures to members.

A good development program may not keep every trainer from leaving. Sometimes it will actually help someone advance to a higher position with another company. However, this does not matter in the long run because a successful professional-development program creates new leaders and will always have a replacement trained and ready to move up.

Protection

As a manager, it's important for you to protect your trainers' professional status and maintain the kind of environment we have already discussed. While change is inevitable for any organization, it should always be handled professionally. Analyze all options before making changes that will greatly impact your trainers, and keep as many programs as possible intact. For example, if a change means lowering compensation, it should not mean lowering your standards for hiring and training. If at all possible, prevent income from decreasing; try to keep commissions up for key staff by asking them to assume more responsibility. To help offset income losses that do occur and to demonstrate your continued commitment to your trainers' careers, maintain or even improve your professional-development program. Explore other incentive options in lieu of cutting commissions, and above all, keep treating and respecting your personal trainers as professionals.

Compensation

From your trainers' point of view, three elements determine how much they can make as professional trainers. First, the amount they charge per session. Second, the commission they receive (or in some cases, the amount of rent they pay). Third, the number of clients they train weekly. Companies must realize how they can influence and impose limits on all three of these factors.

Allowing trainers to charge different rates based on education, certification and experience is a policy I support. One way in which we have effectively—and objectively—established training rates is by overlapping our own requirements with those delineated in the IDEA Personal Fitness Trainer (IDEA-PFT) Recognition System. Using this method has allowed us to identify our personal trainers as professional, advanced, elite or master trainers. (For details on these different categories, see “IDEA-PFT Recognition System Gains Recognition” on page 79.) Besides helping us set rates for sessions, this system clearly defines what trainers must do to advance to the next level and also serves as an incentive, since it puts them in charge of their own professional and financial

growth.

I believe that commissions should also be adjusted to reflect each trainer's education, certification and overall training abilities. Total sales and/or productivity standards can be considered as well. And the ability to handle other tasks, such as payroll, marketing projects, new-member integration management, member services and retention strategies, employee training and internship programs, can also justify higher commissions. Managers benefit by having these tasks accomplished with little or no additional budget. When first determining commissions, remember that a properly directed and motivated professional training staff can become the most powerful member retention tool you have.

The number of weekly sessions trainers can perform largely determines how much they earn in a year. While most of the responsibility for this falls to the trainers themselves, management can influence the amount of time they may devote to clients. Whenever possible, limit nontraining duties and allow your trainers to complete such tasks during nonpeak hours. Only hire new trainers when absolutely necessary. Too many trainers can quickly change a team atmosphere into a competitive environment if there are not enough clients or new members. Also have your trainers participate in new-member integration activities. This is a great way to demonstrate excellent customer service to your new members, and it allows trainers to develop relationships with potential clients. The relationship between membership sales and your ability to obtain or retain professional trainers is a strong one. Keep increasing sales and tapping into new markets, and you will have an easier job retaining trainers.

Once you have established an environment that helps you attract trainers, you will find it's easier to keep them. A professional environment, strong leadership, a good staff training program and a professional-development program are the elements that will attract the quality trainers you seek. If you treat personal trainers as professional trainers, you won't be surprised when an experienced trainer walks through your door at the exact moment you need one!

Everett Aaberg, IDEA Master Personal Fitness Trainer and 2001 IDEA Personal Trainer of the Year, serves as director of education and personal training for International Athletic Club Management in Dallas and teaches at the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research. He is the author of several books, including Resistance Training Instruction and Muscle Mechanics (both published by Human Kinetics). Aaberg will be a presenter at 2001 World Fitness IDEA®, where he will share his secrets on hiring and retaining personal trainers.

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