

Card Tricks

Jay Cross



"Each player must accept the cards life deals him or her, but they are in hand — he or she alone must decide to play the cards in order to win the game."

— Voltaire

A simple stack of cards can have a greater impact on performance than a fancy multimedia production. Let's look at a few examples.

A program encouraged managers to be receptive to their subordinates. To reinforce the lesson, they received cards to give to their employees. The cards carried the message, "In the spirit of openness ... I feel free to raise any issue or concern and expect a considered response from you." Any employee who felt slighted was encouraged to "play the card."

Executives at a troubled company divided cards describing organizational situations into two piles: "That's us" and "That's not us." Then, they selected the "not us" cards that seemed to need work. Their choices highlighted how the executive team saw the company and what areas they deemed most important to work on.

A design firm assembled a deck of 51 "method cards" to inspire its design teams to keep people at the center of the process. Among the 51 techniques: rapid ethnography, paper prototyping, shadowing and camera journal. The designers used the cards when planning projects and to reinforce the firm's design processes.

Star salespeople master knowledge of their products to the point that recall is second nature. It's not enough for sales reps to know the answers — they must have them precisely when they're needed. I asked a dozen salespeople to learn 100 product facts using flashcards. The reps practiced until they could complete the deck in 60 seconds. Sales and self-confidence both rose dramatically.

People are happier and more productive when they know what they like to do, and self-discovery cards can help. People sort the cards into three stacks: Me, Sort of Me and Not Me At All. The cards list general activities such as "exploring the way," "resolving disputes," "making deals" and "investigating things."

People with the same titles at a major oil firm had different ideas of their responsibilities, and management feared the inconsistencies were incurring significant losses. The communications guru at Xplane devised a deck of cards listing job responsibilities. The staff in question identified each position's responsibilities by swapping cards until everyone held a balanced hand.

Cards can be inspirational. New World Library publishes a deck of cards containing quotations of Eckhart Tolle, the author of "The Power of Now." You pick a card at random and reflect on it throughout the day. Wouldn't this be a great way to introduce a new team member to the values of the organization?

When I face a situation where participants drift in over the course of an hour, I distribute cards I've printed out on my personal printer. Further instructions are not required. People begin to discuss the quotations and their relevance without prompting.

Soldiers and airmen used flashcards to develop nearly instantaneous recognition of aircraft during World War I and II. The cards contained silhouettes of planes and photographs of planes in the air. The learning was so successful and the outcome so great, they inspired the opening of Friend or Foe? Museum of Aircraft Recognition in Santa Barbara, Calif.

Merlin Mann describes his invention, the Hipster PDA, as "a fully extensible system for coordinating incoming and outgoing data for any aspect of your life and work. It scales brilliantly, degrades gracefully, supports optional categories and "beaming" and is configurable to an unlimited number of options. Best of all, the Hipster PDA fits into your hip pocket and costs practically nothing to purchase and maintain.

Here are the steps for building a Hipster PDA:

1. Get a bunch of 3-inch-by-5-inch file cards.
2. Clip them together with a binder clip.
3. There is no Step 3.

Cards are inexpensive, portable learning tools that engage learners, facilitate decision-making and improve recall. What's not to like? ■

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