

## *What is Competency-Based Inservice Training?*

Judith S. Rycus, Ph.D., MSW  
Ronald C. Hughes, Ph.D., MScSA

When considering whether to attend inservice training, people typically ask two questions: "What must I know to do my job?" and, "What don't I know?" Sometimes this assessment is done alone, sometimes with a supervisor, training specialist, or mentor. It may be done informally, perhaps a few minutes before selecting a workshop from a conference brochure; or, it may be more rigorous, using a formal training needs assessment instrument. Still, the same two questions are always asked: "What knowledge and skills do I need to proficiently perform my job?" and "In which of these do I need further development?"

Unless these questions are correctly answered, attending a training event can waste valuable staff time and limited training resources. Without an accurate assessment of individual learning needs, training is more likely to be unrelated to learners' jobs, and at an inappropriate developmental level. Frequently heard complaints about training include, "It was interesting, but it doesn't apply to my work;" "It was too basic – I didn't learn anything new;" and, "I'd have better spent my time in the office." In any case, the training will have done little to increase learners' competence, much less enhance services to children and their families.

Failure to accurately identify individual learning needs is one of several conditions that undermine the quality, effectiveness, and relevance of inservice training, and that prevent training from positively impacting job performance and organizational outcomes. Others are:

- 1) Many staff hired to work in child welfare agencies are ill-prepared for the job, are largely unaware of its scope and complexity, and lack even basic

- knowledge of child welfare values, practice principles, or intervention strategies. Staff hired into supervisory or management positions often have no prior training or experience in management technology.
- 2) Caseworkers are often assigned caseloads as soon as they are hired, and they may provide services to families and children for many weeks, or even months, before ever attending job-related training. Supervisors and managers often receive no training at all.
  - 3) The absence of standardized training content and curricula prevents establishing and uniformly communicating a consistent practice model and standards of practice, both of which are essential to achievement of critical organizational outcomes.
  - 4) Rigid standardization, or a "one size fits all" approach to training, fails to address the diversity of staff training needs that exist in any complex organization. Individual training needs will vary in response to differences in job and program assignments; the unique needs and attributes of the population of children and families being served; the social, geographic, and cultural composition of the local community; and employees' previous education, training, and work experience.
  - 5) Mandating all training without encouraging participation by learners in assessing their needs, and in planning their own development, greatly increases resistance to training, decreases personal investment and participation, and increases the likelihood that training content will be ignored when learners return to their jobs.
  - 6) The absence of formal standards and quality control processes for trainers and training curricula can undermine the quality, effectiveness, and relevance of training activities, and makes valid evaluation of trainer performance very difficult.
  - 7) Delivering training at sites far from learners' homes impedes their access to training, reduces attendance, and greatly increases travel and lodging costs.

- 8) Without formal systems to promote transfer of learning, most of what is learned in training will never be used on the job.

The Comprehensive, Competency-Based Inservice Training (CCBIT)<sup>TM</sup> System was developed to address these and other child welfare training challenges. CCBIT<sup>TM</sup> strives to provide the "right training" to the "right people" at the "right time," thereby maximizing the relevance, timeliness, and availability of training, while concurrently insuring that training resources are expended to address the highest priority training needs in the service system.

### ***Elements of a Competency-Based Inservice Training System***

This goal of a CCBIT<sup>TM</sup> system – getting the "right people" to the "right training" at the "right time" – appears fairly straightforward. However, the technology to achieve it is actually quite complex. CCBIT<sup>TM</sup> is a systematic, planful, and well-organized approach to training development and administration. Fully implementing a CCBIT<sup>TM</sup> system requires the development of a formal infrastructure, with both centralized and decentralized management components; the assignment of designated training management staff; a technology to assess, compile, update and prioritize training needs data; an ongoing mechanism to plan, manage, and evaluate program activities; a system to develop and periodically update training curricula, trainers, and other training resources; an easily accessible and efficient training delivery system; and formalized strategies to maximize transfer of learning.

The specific activities necessary to develop and implement a CCBIT<sup>TM</sup> system can be summarized as follows:

## Define Targeted Trainees

The first step is to identify the staff members to be trained, and the work groups to which they belong. A work group includes staff members who perform similar job responsibilities and are therefore likely to have similar training needs. In child welfare, there are several distinct work groups – direct service caseworkers; line supervisors; foster, kinship, and adoptive parents; mid-level and program managers; executives; residential child care workers; service aides, and others. In complex community-based and multi-disciplinary service systems, community partners may also be targeted to receive training. The competencies, curricula, trainers, and training activities developed for each work group will vary, depending upon the particular requirements of their jobs.

Most child welfare training systems prioritize the development of training for work groups whose activities have the most immediate and profound impact on children and families – i.e., direct service caseworkers, and their supervisors. However, when CCBIT™ is fully operational, training should be provided for all staff in the organization on the premise that any staff member who lacks the ability to perform his/her job will negatively impact mission achievement in some manner.

## Conduct Job-Task Analysis

Since the primary objective of CCBIT™ is to promote "best practice," it is necessary to define and compile both performance standards that reflect "best practice" and the work activities necessary to achieve them. This is best accomplished by a leadership group that includes agency managers and supervisors, training managers, child welfare content experts, and experienced direct service practitioners. Through a collaborative planning process, this team defines and formalizes the organization's mission; delineates standards of "best practice" to be implemented throughout the organization; and establishes desired organizational performance outcomes.

Once these elements are in place, it is possible to compile a list of all the necessary activities to achieve them. This comprehensive compilation of staff

activities is called the Universe of Work Activities. The term, "universe," is used here in its mathematical context to represent a set – a finite, comprehensive, closed grouping of related objects or elements. The Universe of Work Activities incorporates all the activities that must be performed if the organization is to achieve desired outcomes, while simultaneously excluding activities that are not essential to outcome achievement. Thus, the job/task analysis for a CCBIT™ system defines what employees *should* be doing to achieve desired outcomes in accordance with principles of "best practice;" not necessarily what they *are* currently doing. The job/task analysis for a CCBIT™ system cannot simply be an inventory of current job activities. Unfortunately, this is an all-too-common means of updating job descriptions in many organizations.

The Universe of Work Activities should be the foundation for development of formal position descriptions for all staff in the organization. When position descriptions are properly formulated, they can be used to manage individual job performance by accurately delineating job requirements and performance expectations, and subsequently evaluating the degree to which these have been met.

The Universe of Work Activities must be periodically reviewed and updated to reflect changes in the organization's mission, desired performance outcomes, or "best practice" standards.

### Developing Competencies

A competency is a grouping of elements of knowledge and skill necessary for the effective performance of a job task. "Competent" staff have the ability – that is, the requisite knowledge and skills – to proficiently perform their jobs.

Once the job/task analysis is completed and position descriptions have been finalized, we can identify the prerequisite knowledge and skills necessary for performance of all assigned job responsibilities in the organization. The resulting statements of knowledge and skills are then grouped, hierarchically organized, and sequenced, creating a Universe of Competencies. A separate Universe of Competencies is generally developed for each work group targeted to receive

training. This Universe of Competencies includes all the knowledge and skills potentially needed by staff in that work group to perform their assigned job tasks. Knowledge and skills that are not essential to completing the listed job tasks are excluded from the Universe of Competencies.

The defining characteristic of competency-based inservice training is that the Universe of Competencies drives all components of the training system, including the individual training needs assessment, the identification and selection of training curricula, the assessment and selection of trainers, the development of the training plan, and transfer of learning activities. As is true for the Universe of Work Activities, the Universe of Competencies must be periodically reviewed and revised to reflect changes in practice standards and job requirements.

#### Individual Training Needs Assessment (ITNA)

The Individual Training Needs Assessment formalizes the process of answering the two essential questions posed at the beginning of this discussion – "What knowledge and skills do I need to proficiently perform my job?" and "In which of these do I need further development?"

The Universe of Competencies provides standardized criteria on which to base a determination of training needs, as well as a structured thought process to maximize the likelihood of valid conclusions. Simply stated, a training need exists when a competency is important to the performance of an employee's job, and, when the employee needs further development in that competency to achieve job proficiency.

The Universe of Competencies compiles the knowledge and skills potentially needed by all staff in a work group, and thus represents the universe of potential training need for that work group. The relevant competencies for any individual employee will be a subset of these competencies. This subset is determined by first evaluating the importance of each competency in the Universe of Competencies to the performance of the employee's particular job. The more critical a knowledge or skill area to performing the job, and the more often the

employee must use the knowledge or skill, the greater the level of importance. Conversely, a competency for a peripheral and rarely implemented job activity will be of little or no importance. As an example, the skills to conduct a risk assessment would be extremely important to an intake caseworker, but less important to a caseworker whose job is completing adoption homestudies.

The second ITNA criteria, the degree to which an employee needs further development, is measured by determining the employee's current level of proficiency. If an employee has sufficient proficiency in a competency to effectively perform the job, training is of low priority. If an employee has little or no proficiency in the competency, training is of high priority.

The ITNA process ranks the combined effects of these two criteria to determine and prioritize individual training needs. Both criteria, level of importance and level of proficiency, are ranked on a Likert scale. The highest priority training needs occur when employees need considerable development in competencies that are essential to job performance. By contrast, competencies that are unimportant to the job or in which employees are already proficient are never considered training needs. By rank ordering ratings on individual competencies, we create a prioritized training needs profile, which enables the employee to attend training activities that address the specific competencies in which further development is most needed.

The ITNA process is most valid when completed collaboratively by the employee whose needs are being assessed and his/her direct supervisor. The ITNA promotes a constructive dialogue about performance expectations and current levels of job proficiency, and facilitates development of an individual learning plan. ITNA data should be reviewed periodically to check the employee's progress in mastering needed knowledge and skills and to identify additional learning needs. In this manner, in the context of a supportive supervisory relationship that focuses on educational supervision, the ITNA process plays a fundamental role in continuing performance improvement.

The ITNA also drives the development and delivery of all training for the service system. The compiled needs assessment data from all staff in a work group is used by CCBIT™ training managers to identify the highest priority needs in the

service system, and to assure that training is developed to meet those needs. The needs assessment process is dynamic. As training is delivered, training needs change, and new assessment data will produce different training priorities for the system. The training system must have the capacity to re-identify and address continually evolving training priorities.

#### Identification and Selection of Curricula

The Universe of Competencies is also used to define appropriate content for inclusion in training curricula. When a curriculum is being developed in response to identified training needs, training managers must delineate the specific competencies needed by the targeted learners and assure they are addressed by the curriculum. This is also true when reviewing already developed curricula and resources to determine their appropriateness to meet identified training needs. Training content that does not target some portion of the Universe of Competencies is not legitimate for inclusion in any curriculum for that work group.

The Universe of Competencies also promotes the standardization of training curricula, where this is needed. Standardized curricula assure that the knowledge and skills necessary for consistent and uniform practice are routinely imparted to staff members throughout the system regardless of when, where, or from whom they receive the training. This is especially critical when training in Core-level competencies, which are essential and fundamental for all members of the targeted work group (see below.)

For the CCBIT™ system to be comprehensive, it must ultimately be able to provide training in all the competencies in a Universe of Competencies. However, this is beyond the resource capacity of most child welfare training systems. By enabling training managers to prioritize training needs, the ITNA assures using limited developmental resources on curricula that address the highest priority needs first.

## Selection and Preparation of Trainers

In a CCBIT™ system, trainers are evaluated on a variety of criteria including their presentation and group facilitation skills; their knowledge of child welfare practice; and their prior work experience in child welfare or a related field. Then, in a second level of assessment, the trainer and training manager jointly identify the specific competencies the trainer is best suited to train. Trainers must demonstrate very high levels of knowledge and skill proficiency in a competency area before they can be approved to train it.

## Development of Training Plan

Developing the training plan involves reviewing ITNA data, identifying the highest priority training needs, selecting the most appropriate curricula and trainers to address them, and determining where to hold the training so it is easily accessible to targeted trainees. CCBIT™ training managers develop and publish the schedule of training events for staff in their catchment area. Since training needs in any dynamic organization are continually evolving, training plans should optimally be developed and disseminated quarterly, assuring that training is timely and responsive to changing needs.

## Deliver Training

Training occurs only after the steps described above have been completed. The rigorous planning, preparation, and management of pre-training activities is essential to getting the "right people" (with the identified learning need), to the "right training" (the most appropriate curriculum and trainer to address the needed competencies) at the "right time" (as soon as possible after the need is identified.)

## Implement Transfer of Learning (TOL) Activities

Transfer of Learning activities should be planned, designed, and integrated into all training curricula. Further, all trainers should routinely incorporate TOL strategies such as idea catchers and action planning, into all their workshops. CCBIT™ training managers have a responsibility to promote TOL by working with agency supervisors and managers before, during, and after training events to help them understand how to promote their staff's use of newly acquired knowledge and skills on the job. Only if this occurs will training have any noticeable impact on job performance or agency outcomes. (See resource paper on Transfer of Learning.)

## Evaluation and Feedback

CCBIT™ training incorporates a variety of both formative and summative evaluation strategies. Formative evaluation assesses the quality and effectiveness of the training event itself. Participants are asked to evaluate the trainer's performance, including mastery of the topic; presentation and facilitation skills; ability to engage and involve the group; ability to relate training concepts to child welfare practice; ability to integrate concepts of culture; and use of time. Participants are also asked to evaluate the relevance of the training to their jobs and skill levels, and how well the training addressed their identified learning needs. This data is compiled and used to monitor trainer performance, and to identify where coaching, technical assistance, or corrective action is needed. This evaluation data also informs needed changes in the curriculum or training methodologies.

Summative evaluations are designed to assess outcomes. The outcomes of training can be objectively determined at several levels; the degree to which learners acquired new knowledge and skills; the degree to which training changed behavior on the job; and the degree to which training impacted organizational outcomes (Kirkpatrick, 1987.) A variety of evaluation methodologies are utilized, depending upon the criteria to be evaluated, the group to be sampled, and the level of depth and scope of the intended evaluation.

## ***The Hierarchical Sequencing of Competencies***

A fully operational CCBIT™ system provides staff with relevant learning opportunities for as long as they work in the service system. Building competence in highly complex competency areas often takes repeated exposures to the concepts and principles, at increasing levels of depth and specificity, over extended periods of time. A sequenced approach to training not only builds staff competence, but can also support career ladders and promote staff retention. This process is facilitated by hierarchically organizing the competencies in the Universe of Competencies.

### What is Core?

Certain competencies are essential to all members of an identified work group, regardless of their unique job requirements or placement in the organization. These foundation-level knowledge and skills are referred to as Core. Training in Core competencies is usually mandated for all new staff shortly after they are hired. By standardizing curricula to train these Core competencies, we can assure that newly hired staff acquire the fundamental skills to do their jobs, while promoting a common philosophy, a consistent standard of practice, and the use of "best practice" methodologies throughout the service system.

For child welfare caseworkers, training in Core competencies provides the framework for "best practice" by imparting the underlying philosophy, values, and principles of "best practice" and introducing the fundamental and essential social work skills of relationship development, family assessment, case planning, and interviewing. They also address fundamental child-welfare specific skills, such as recognizing and identifying maltreatment, assessing risk and safety, family-centered in-home services, the technology of child placement, promoting permanence for children, and working with foster, adoptive, and kinship caregivers.

However, while Core competencies are both fundamental and essential, they are far from simple. Core-level skills are sufficiently complex to require considerable practice and coaching over time to achieve mastery and proficiency. Further,

due to differences in job responsibilities of staff in a targeted training group, Core-level competencies can address only about 60% of the competencies needed by any individual. The remaining competencies must be acquired in post-Core training designed to address individual training needs. Thus, to achieve job proficiency, trainees must be provided with ongoing and properly sequenced follow-up training, with structured opportunities for supervised practice, coaching, and feedback on the job (See resource papers on Levels of Learning and Transfer of Learning.)

### Specialized Practice and Related Skills Competencies

The Universe of Competencies is hierarchically organized to promote the most effective sequencing of post-core training. Post-core competencies fall into two categories; Specialized Practice competencies, and Related Skills competencies.

Specialized Practice competencies are child-welfare specific and include the knowledge and skills needed to work in child welfare program areas such as intake and investigation, child sexual abuse, foster care, independent living, adoption, family-based neighborhood programs, and residential child care.

Related Skills competencies include advanced level social work knowledge, skills, and technologies such as family interviewing, behavior management, crisis intervention, and group work. Related Skills competencies also incorporate knowledge and skills from other practice fields and disciplines that can refine and enhance child welfare practice. These include substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, health, mental retardation, and other developmental disabilities. Since many Related Skills competencies reflect knowledge and skills from other practice disciplines, they are a principal resource to guide development of "cross-system" or interdisciplinary training.

### Accreted and Discrete Competencies

Training curricula for Specialized Practice and Related Skills competencies may vary considerably in their scope and depth, depending on the particular

competencies they are designed to address. "Accreted" competencies are broad in scope and cover a wide range of related knowledge and skills. Training in accreted competencies generally provides a broad overview of multiple aspects of the topic. It is most appropriate when introducing new content, creating awareness, imparting basic principles, and promoting a general understanding of the topic - that is, training to Levels I and II of the Levels of Learning. (See Resource Paper on Levels of Learning.)

An accreted competency related to sexual abuse investigation might be:

"Worker knows the components of an effective sexual abuse investigation; the respective roles and responsibilities of child welfare and law enforcement; and strategies for collaborative investigative interviewing."

By contrast, "discrete" competencies are usually quite narrow in scope and focus on one or two very specific knowledge and skills to considerable depth. Discrete competencies are generally best used to develop "advanced" level training, or training that focuses on application and skill development (Levels II and IV of the Levels of Learning.) A very discrete competency would be:

"Worker knows interviewing strategies to investigate sexual abuse when the victim is an adolescent with mental retardation."

The depth and breadth of Specialized Practice and Related Skills competencies provide relevant training opportunities as long as staff are employed in the child welfare system. An employee's particular job assignment will determine the need for training in both Specialized and Related Skills competencies. Therefore, completion of an Individual Training Needs Assessment should determine attendance at training in specialized practice and related skills topic areas.

Discrete competencies are also useful in delineating knowledge and skill areas where staff would benefit from intensive on-the-job coaching and mentoring, or self-directed learning activities to promote skill mastery.

## System Change Through Training

When a CCBIT™ System is fully implemented, it forms an integral part of the management structure of the organization. While the most immediate outcome of training is staff competence, the ultimate goal is really implementation of "best practice" on behalf of children and families. While training can never, by itself, assure that the organization will achieve its outcomes, any organization that lacks well-trained, competent staff is almost certain to fail. CCBIT™ was designed to drive system change by defining outcomes and "best practice" principles, and by developing the staff competence necessary to achieve them. In this context, when fully integrated with other management strategies and interventions, CCBIT™ can be a powerful tool to promote and support large-scale organizational change.