

Demolishing Stress, Increasing Productivity & Shifting Company Culture: Texas CASA & Empowered Productivity Training™ from RegainYourTime.com

Just six hours of training and an office competition brought productivity and peace to the 20 employees of Texas CASA, a non-profit in Austin. Employees who described themselves as overwhelmed, stressed and frustrated, now say they feel in control.

This organization not only deemed the training a resounding success, but the contest they implemented to encourage follow-up also led to sweeping changes like an improved culture and refined policies. These efforts turned the organization's training investment into a tangible benefit for employees and the company at large.

What is Texas CASA?

Texas CASA is the overarching organization that links 69 of that state's separate Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) programs. Each program pairs volunteers with children who have been removed from their homes and placed in the state's child welfare system. The volunteers serve as voices for these children, advocating for the best possible care and treatment. Every year some 19,000 children are served by an estimated 5,600 volunteers. Many volunteers are assigned to multiple children. The local agencies serve 205 different Texas counties. The job of Texas CASA is to advocate for these organizations, their volunteers and the children they serve. The state nonprofit provides many services including training, seeking grants, developing stable sources of income, monitoring and lobbying the state Legislature, and promoting the programs.

Their mission is critical and unique, but many of their tasks match those of any business, such as: generating revenue, tackling legal issues, training staff members, marketing, and meeting human resources requirements.

Why Texas CASA Chose Empowered Productivity™ Training

Joe Gagen has been chief executive officer of Texas CASA for four years. After reading *First Break All the Rules* by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, Gagen asked the question, "Do you feel you have the tools to do your job?" He felt that for his staff, the answer was "no."

He knew time management and information management skills were critical not only in his own professional life, but in his personal life as well. As is often the case, his job-change caused an upheaval in his habits and tools, and he found himself back to an old habit of using a spiral notebook to build a to-do list, which he knew wasn't efficient. He heard about RegainYourTime.com through the Texas Society of Association Executives, and after speaking with Maura Thomas, Chief Trainer, he decided it was a great fit, particularly because it offered not only the Empowered Productivity System methodology, but also the option to use Microsoft Outlook as a support tool, and CASA already had this program in the office.

RegainYourTime.com makes a practice of offering local non-profits a one-hour, introductory “mini-training” at no charge, of which TX CASA availed themselves. Staffers were so encouraged they requested more. Gagen then scheduled a full six-hour training session with Thomas over a two-day period.

Before Empowered Productivity: Overwhelmed by “Just-in-Case”

Here are just a few examples of work life at Texas CASA before the training:

- CEO Gagen was tracking his tasks with a spiral notebook. If he didn't carry it everywhere – and it didn't fit in his pocket – he often missed writing things down.

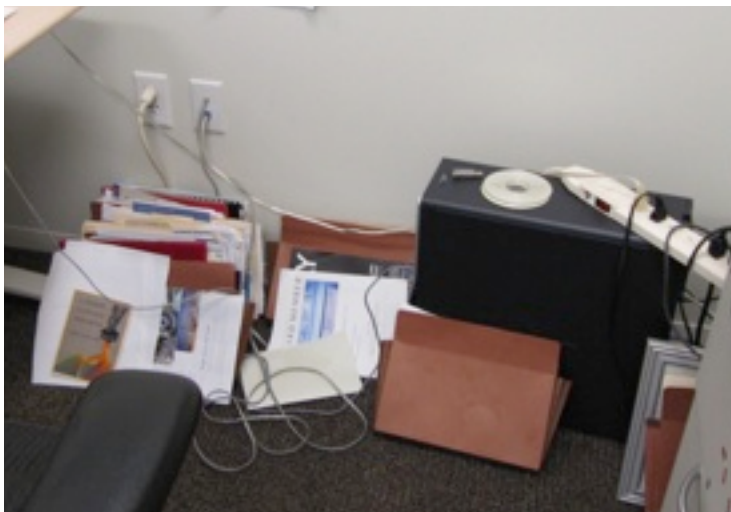


- In addition, his office was buried in piles. Just a glance inside revealed a hapless “file by pile” approach. Worse for staffers, he was difficult to reach because he wasn't managing his incoming messages – e-mail and voice – effectively.

- Melissa Sarkar, chief administrative officer, was a self-described, “Post-it® Note Girl.” Her e-mail inbox typically contained 20 to 30 e-mails a day from vendors and internal sources. She admitted this, “wasn't that many,” but she never threw them away, creating a visually overwhelming backlog of thousands of e-mails. She would write her tasks down on notes. She said she “liked the feeling” of wadding up the notes and tossing them in the trash. But she couldn't access the notes from any location, and notes often got lost altogether.

- Dennise Jackson was a seven-year veteran with the nonprofit and one of its more senior employees. She was completely stressed. She would enter the office and feel a sense of dread. “I would go into meetings and get a lot of information, but where do I put it? I had so much stuff. I would be so frustrated because my desk was disorganized and every day more papers would come my way... Everyone’s office was out of control. I knew I wasn’t the only one.” She felt she needed to keep everything, “just in case.” Worse, she didn’t have a process to get details out of her head and onto paper. At best, she would scribble notes on a legal pad.
- The office computer room was filled with junk and piled with dusty boxes. When Sarkar was hired, they said they would “clean that out sometime.” Sometime became never as more stuff migrated from overwhelmed offices.
- Thousands – possibly hundreds of thousands – of unneeded e-mails languished on the company’s hard drives, wasting storage space. No one knew how to file or store them, and everyone kept them “just in case.” Critical e-mails took hours or days to unearth from nonessential items.

- Maribel, the nonprofit’s events planner, was buried in “stuff.” Items had been saved from every event in the organization’s history. She didn’t use them, but she didn’t feel she could throw them away. Instead, they sat in her office making it tough to find items she needed, and creating clutter that added to her stress.



- The entire office was drowning in files. Piles of files buried desks and spilled out of cabinets. Boxes of files were stacked in corners, and even under chairs meant for visitors. There was no place to store needed files and staffers often waded through boxes of junk to find critical paperwork. Convenient desk-side drawers were so stuffed, papers had to be jammed inside, discouraging filing altogether.

- Few people had personal items in their offices. Instead there were piles of paper, creating a sterile, chaotic environment that was unwelcoming, uninspiring, and stress-inducing.
- Staff members said they felt they needed to respond to all e-mail immediately. Interruptions were constant as computers dinged with every incoming message. Staffers rushed from what they perceived to be one emergency to another, never able to complete a task or a thought, constantly multi-tasking and feeling overwhelmed and chaotic. Critical messages for staff members went unheeded, buried in the swarm of unmanaged and disorganized email traffic.
- Staff members often sent copies of e-mails to every person who might have the slightest interest in a message, “just in case,” creating an overwhelming river of traffic to people who were neither decision-makers, nor affected by the content.

Highlights of Empowered Productivity Training [™]

RegainYourTime.com’s unique process explains ways to decrease stress by teaching employees how to get things out of their heads. CASA staffers were introduced to the concept that “you can only manage things when you can see them, and you can only see them when they are out of your head.”

Throughout the training, participants are guided through ways to eliminate physical and digital clutter. Thomas teaches key techniques and instructs staff members on specific ways to manage information using a variety of software, including Microsoft Outlook, on both Macs and PCs. She includes information on how to best use this software, apps, smart phones and other technology to track information so it is accessible at work, at home and on the go. Employees learn BOTH a methodology, AND how to use technology more effectively.

In the case of Texas CASA, the training took three hours over two days. Staff members had a chance to ask specific questions. They carefully reviewed how the methods they learned could be used with the tools they already owned or worked with at the office. They also learned about helpful free and inexpensive programs and smart phone applications.

What they didn’t know before, but became apparent during the training, was that they also had a strong desire for culture change. Staff members said these skills could never be employed if they didn’t set aside time to implement the new habits, and if they didn’t give each other permission to do things differently.

The Contest: Changing company culture

“How do we keep this real and alive?” Sarkar asked herself. “Unless we keep it real it’s going to go by the wayside.”

Gagen began by giving staff members two hours every Friday to simply get their lives organized. No meetings were scheduled and employees were expected to clear the clutter, implement what they learned, and adapt the Empowered Productivity System in their company computers. But more was needed. They knew some staff members were comfortable with their old habits. They wanted a way to “cut the negative chatter.” “When you are asking people to change, a naysayer can give you an excuse not to change,” Gagen said.

Gagen and Sarkar discussed what made their workplace unique so they could tap into those strengths. Their office staff flourished with competition. During events like birthday parties or training sessions, “when we got into teams, people got fired up.”

Sarkar thought that for their workplace, a contest might be a great option. They decided to have staff members compete and see who could increase their productivity and effectiveness the most in eight weeks. She knew that if staff members were allowed to compete individually, many would simply choose not to participate and retain their old, ineffective habits. Sarkar decided they should compete as teams.

Sarkar divided the teams by personal strengths, to ensure each had an equal number of members with organizational skills, tech skills and enthusiasm for the program. This allowed team members to mentor one another. They learned that having one enthusiastic staff member on each team was critical to success. Also critical, Sarkar divided people out of their normal workplace departments. The goal was to increase morale and have different people get to know each other. But it had other benefits.

“Breaking up departments was essential because you could break the dynamics of hierarchy,” said Jackson. As prizes, the members of the winning team would each receive a day of paid vacation and movie tickets.

“Having time off is perfect because you are going to make up for it in increased productivity,” Gagen said. During the course of the contest, they also added awards such as Best Team Name, and Most Unique Tool to Help the Team.

The Competition

Team competition created positive peer pressure, which changed the office culture.

“It kept the naysayers down. It would look unsportsman-like,” Gagen said. “The naysayers didn’t do well, but they didn’t detract.”

It also increased the effort and attention office staff paid to the concepts they learned in the training. By working together, those applying what they learned had encouragement and support, rather than derision.

“I worked a lot harder that I would have because I didn’t want to let my team down,” Gagen said.

“We had permission and support that made all the difference. Everyone was allowed to make progress on an individual basis and as a team,” Jackson said.

As part of the competition, staff members decorated the office with signs with their team names. One team created a before-and-after scrapbook documenting changes. Staff members redecorated offices.

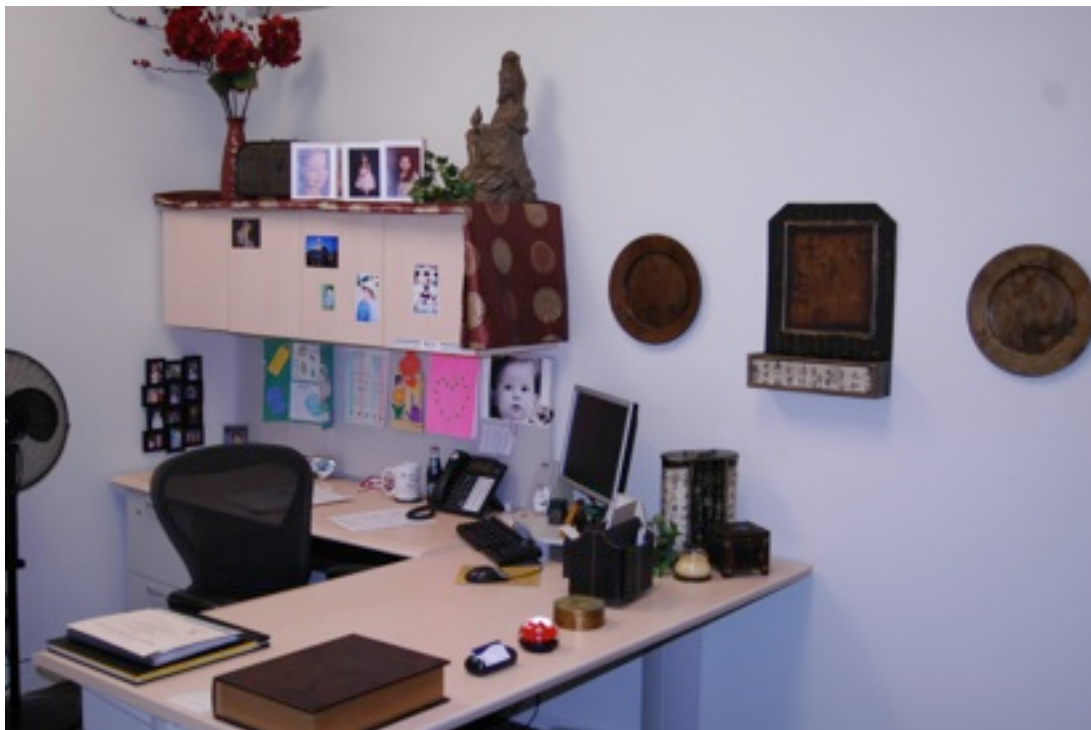
At the end, Maura Thomas came back to evaluate their efforts. She looked at team members’ computer systems, file drawers and office spaces. She asked them questions about what was different for them now. Rather than measure how well the staff members’ employed her specific system, she assessed how much more productive and organized they appeared and felt.

One Result of Empowered Productivity Training: Permission to Let it Go

During the course of the contest, staff members made a concerted effort to change the way they did things. This was not only obvious to those in the contest, but to anyone visiting the office. “(The difference was) getting permission to let go of stuff. It’s not critical to keep everything. You had to let it go,” Jackson said. “Before I would throw away only 3 percent of the paper I received.”

Some of the changes included:

- Eight to ten YEARS of accumulated file boxes were sorted and discarded. They adopted a motto of, “If you have not looked at it in two years, you don’t need to keep it.”
- The events planner disposed of years of unneeded, bulky piles.
- Hundreds of pounds of paper were recycled, so much that an award was presented to the maintenance staff for hauling dumpsters of paper away.
- The server room, long a dumping ground of office overflow, was cleared. Now rather than gathering dust, it is easily accessible for IT staff.
- Tens of thousands of e-mails were discarded, freeing computer storage space.
- Boxes of files no longer languish in corners and on chairs. Instead, staff members have room for personal items, which make for more desirable spaces to spend time.



- One office was a complete transformation. “Before there wasn’t anything personal,” Sarkar said. “Now there’s a picture of her granddaughter on her desk, among other things.”

- Another office became a Zen-inspired environment with cohesive decorating, upholstery and artwork.



- File drawers are now easy to open and files are carefully categorized and color-coded, making paperwork a cinch to put away and find again.



- Even enclosed file spaces are now open and free to hold needed items.
- Most the staff members say they now have EMPTY or nearly empty email inboxes, and they still can easily retrieve the information they need.

Finding Control

Frequently Texas CASA staff members said they now felt calm and IN CONTROL. It appears some of the biggest changes were emotional. Comments included:

- “I love the way Maura taught me to organize things I need to do. Categories have been very helpful. You can get control. I feel more comfortable that I have a filing system. The biggest help was the T-E-S-T Process. I knew what I should turn into tasks.” – Joe
- “I can feel when I’ve gotten out of my task list. I feel a little out of control. When I’m on my game, I understand what’s on my list for the day. I feel less hectic and chaotic, personally and professionally.” – Melissa
- “I had so much stuff in my head. It got out of my head into action form in my task folder....I have a better path of how to effectively produce....I am definitely not under the same amount of stress. I feel more organized and efficient.... I'm excited about going to work again, and I leave work with less stress. And it's very exciting to see people taking pride in their workspace.” – Denisse
- “I even applied this process at home and it has helped quite a bit.” – Anne
- “I used to collect everything, but now I can actually find things easily.” – Juliet
- “I purged two, three-tier bookshelves and an entire four-drawer file cabinet. It feels GREAT!” – Cathy
- “I really want to thank you. Your training has helped us work smarter and everyone is more organized.” – Deedra

Benefits for management

As non-profit managers, Gagen and Sarkar were particularly concerned that the training would be worth the investment of time and money. The combination of effective training and the follow-up contest put those fears to rest.

“Professional development done correctly is a benefit of the job, if it’s presented well and it’s well received. The way people responded to the contest did that.” Gagen said.

“This training was fantastic,” said Sarkar. “It has completely changed the morale of the organization.”

Said Dennise Jackson, the TX CASA veteran, “You brought light into my world. Thank you. Thank you!”