



## Case Study March 2004

# Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy, Small Business Winner, 2003 Solving the Training Puzzle at La Ronge Motor Hotel

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses workplace literacy.

### OVERVIEW

**T**he La Ronge Motor Hotel, located in a small northern Saskatchewan community two-and-a-half hours north of the nearest large urban centre, is the last full-service hotel on the road north. The hotel employs 65 local residents and is owned and operated by the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. The hotel is a key player in providing hospitality to a diverse clientele who come to La Ronge to experience the relaxed environment, along with the comfort and convenience of a well-appointed hotel.

Prior to 1995, the work culture and ethic of staff at the hotel was indifferent, and the attitudes toward learning ranged from non-existent to downright negative. As a result, the La Ronge was not meeting the industry standards of a full-service medium-sized hotel. To address the need for skills upgrading and higher levels of customer

Effective practices case study  
in providing training and  
supporting workplace literacy

**Name of Program**  
Workplace Training Puzzle

**Date Established**  
1995

**Skills Developed**

- Communication
- Teamwork
- Leadership

**Contact**

Roy Charles  
General Manager  
La Ronge Motor Hotel  
Box 39  
La Ronge, SK S0J 1A0  
Tel. (306) 425-2190  
Fax (306) 425-3066  
[manager\\_lrmh@qlo.com](mailto:manager_lrmh@qlo.com)

service, hotel management and employees made a conscious decision to adopt a positive approach. They chose to move away from a tendency to blame others for problems and elected to work together to come up with training solutions.

To address the varied skills needs of its workforce, the hotel adopted a progressive training program, the Workplace Training Puzzle. This training strategy views each employee's skills needs as a unique "training puzzle" to be solved by management, instructors, supervisors and the employee all working together as a team. Through a customized training solution, the personal circumstances and skills needs of the employee—as well as the needs of the organization—are addressed.

This proactive training plan relies on committed hotel management working collaboratively with the hotel administrator (Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership) and a local community college (Northlands College). The provincial post-secondary skills training department (Saskatchewan Learning), the Saskatchewan Tourism Education Council (STEC) and the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board (SLFDB) also helped bring the project to life with funding and training expertise.

#### **La Ronge: Where the Road Ends**

La Ronge is an important trading and social hub. The town and its environment are home to key public services, including the Northern Lights School Division, a hospital, Northlands College, an airport and various federal and provincial government offices.

La Ronge is a key staging point for expeditions into northern Saskatchewan. All roads end here, at this gateway to the province's 100,000 lakes. From La Ronge, local people and a growing contingent of Canadian and American travellers make their way, via plane and boat, to popular hunting and fishing camps.

### **OBJECTIVES**

The local workforce is largely Aboriginal and, to some extent, transient. Among the Cree of La Ronge, most have had limited access to a formal education based on writing and reading, yet a strong oral culture persists. Hotel management capitalizes on the cultural background of the employees and uses the strengths of their oral culture to facilitate workplace training. The training begins with conversations and discussions, thereby building on the Aboriginal employees' oral traditions of sharing information through storytelling. As an employee's confidence and skills improve, written communications become part of the training curriculum.

Objectives for the Workplace Training Puzzle program at La Ronge Motor Hotel address both individual employee and organizational training needs, to:

- bring the level of customer service up to the modern industry standards of a full-service medium-sized hotel in order to increase profits and expand into new markets; and
- provide customized training to individual employees, based on their needs and circumstances.

### **TARGET GROUPS**

The Workplace Training Puzzle program at La Ronge Motor Hotel is a customized training solution developed in-house. As such, it targets all employees at the hotel including:

- housekeeping staff, used as the first "test" group;
- front desk agents;
- food and beverage servers; and
- managers.

### **ACTIVITIES**

Management's goals for upgraded skills and improved service levels were achieved through customized employee training programs. Developed in consultation with the employee, the Workplace Training Puzzle program aims to help employees achieve a balance between meeting the priorities of home life, community and work. It addresses the realities of personal time demands, career aspirations and the challenges of working in a remote northern environment. The Puzzle program strives to find the answer or solution to training needs, based on the employees' specific challenges.

Once established and accepted by the employees, the training program at La Ronge Motor Hotel gradually expanded with the help of local educational institutions and literacy professionals. Learning is offered through a variety of methods, including class time, one-on-one tutoring and self-study, depending on the needs of the individual learner. At the hotel, the Workplace Training Puzzle includes specific training initiatives, such as:

- a housekeeping training video produced in First Nations languages for Aboriginal employees;
- the Workplace Open Learning Fulfillment (WOLF) program to help employees receive national certification for achieving industry standards; and
- graduation ceremonies upon program completion to give status to successful employee-students.

## RESOURCES

To accommodate the learning delivery methods, which include class time, one-on-one tutoring and self-study, hotel management makes the following resources available:

- an on-site classroom for literacy and STEC training in the hotel;
- books, desks, pencils, paper, and eventually computers; and
- part-time teachers.

By dedicating an on-site space to training, management demonstrated its support of efforts to improve employee skills. In addition, a nameplate on the classroom door initially gave in-house visibility to the training initiatives. Employees, in passing the nameplate regularly during their daily work activities, began to accept training as part of a positive work environment. And the familiar sight of the training room nameplate helped employees overcome their reluctance to take part in formal education.

## INNOVATIONS

The Workplace Training Puzzle model or approach to training is itself an innovative strategy derived from management's work with the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board. The positive approach that it engenders is inspirational and motivating. The model shows that challenges to training are not infinite or unreachable but can instead lead to solutions that complete the overall training puzzle of how, where and why training should be delivered.

The initial pilot training program was intended for the housekeeping staff at the hotel. The training included an existing housekeeping training video that the staff pointed out did not meet their needs nor suit their culture. Due entirely to their input, a second training video was produced in First Nations languages (and English) and featured an Aboriginal narrator/character. Funded by the hotel with a government subsidy, the video was the first of its kind to be used in training Aboriginal employees.

The success of the pilot training video spurred the creation of the WOLF program to help build and sustain a culture of learning at the hotel. WOLF's initial goal was to raise the skills of the hotel employees in the housekeeping department to industry standards and help them achieve national certification. Using the Workplace Training Puzzle approach and an Aboriginal former co-worker as a tutor, many of the housekeeping staff achieved certification. Later, front desk agents and food and beverage servers also became certified to national industry standards through the WOLF training program.

Due to the initial accomplishments of the Workplace Training Puzzle strategy, other training innovations at the hotel emerged and will be underway in the near future:

- retail manager training for department managers leading to certification—uses the Workplace Training Puzzle model to give managers the skills to meet the immediate demands of their jobs;
- “train the trainer” course for managers and supervisors—this has already been piloted at the hotel and will be repeated to enhance managers' training of employees; and
- training video for food and beverage servers—a second customized training resource video to improve customer service.

## BARRIERS

Hotel management was concerned about not meeting industry standards and the impacts on employee morale, customer service, and organizational performance. Employees held negative attitudes toward training and skills upgrading, and tended to blame others for problems. Although management wished to improve the skill levels of the workforce, it had limited funds and access to expert training resources.

In addition to poor attitudes toward training within the hotel, the very nature of the local workforce presented training challenges. The local employee base stems from an Aboriginal (mostly Cree) population with a strong oral rather than written culture. Moreover, the pool of employees had limited access to formal education and was typically skeptical about its value. Consequently, some employees were reluctant, shy or even fearful to take part in formal training classes.

## SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

At La Ronge Motor Hotel, the employer supports workplace training initiatives, and traditional training providers develop and carry them out, with a “hand on the pulse” of the employees. In other words, management strives to balance the needs of the organization with the needs of individual employees. The process of improving skills at the hotel is a relentless search for opportunities to build on. By choosing to work together and find positive solutions to each others’ challenges, management and the employees are training and learning leaders.

*“In the North, you are only limited by your imagination and the amount of hard work you are willing to put in.”*

*—General Manager, La Ronge Motor Hotel*

## OUTCOMES

With the Workplace Training Puzzle approach, the ongoing support of management and the enthusiasm of the employees, the La Ronge is meeting its hotel training objectives. It has also achieved its vision: it is now recognized as an industry standard, full-service medium-sized hotel. Employees have received certification in recognition of their skills upgrading and are now performing at industry standard levels. The customized training programs offered at the hotel also meet their personal development needs.

## IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

Through the training initiatives, employees have either achieved or feel they have access to professional national certification and recognition. The hotel now boasts a staff complement of nationally certified employees in many departments, and many more employees are working toward certification. The work and training culture at the hotel are now up to industry standard. The positive attitude that now exists toward skills improvement will help serve as a foundation for additional training programs, which, in fact, are already underway.

## USE AS A MODEL

A positive approach to training, which was used at the hotel, is the key to replicating this successful Workplace Training Puzzle model. Hotel management viewed training needs as challenges that required solutions. Management’s optimistic attitude engendered confidence in their employees and encouraged them to endeavour to overcome their shortcomings. In light of their success, Northlands College and the management of La Ronge Motor Hotel have made presentations on this training model to the national Interprovincial Association on Native Employment and to the Association of Canadian Community Colleges.

### About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses the theme of workplace literacy and highlights an award winner from the Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy, funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada.

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by *Alison Campbell*

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255 Smyth Road, Ottawa, ON K1H 8M7 Canada  
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The Conference Board, Inc. 845 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y., 10022-6679 U.S.A. Tel. (212) 759-0900 • Fax (212) 980-7014 • [www.conference-board.org](http://www.conference-board.org)  
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ISSN 1492-501X • ISBN 0-88763-629-2 • Agreement No. 40063028  
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