How to build commitment for peer learning at the onset to training?

The Request. The Director of Facilities Management from a large city was getting feedback from the human resources department that the supervisors in his department had a disproportionate number of complaints filed against them by staff. He decided to sponsor a training program for first line supervisors and leads so they would effectively resolve issues and decrease the number of formal complaints. The Director asked that a training program be developed which included a pre-assessment to raise the issues and assess skill level.

Larger Context. This was a union shop and the leads and supervisors were also unionized. Many of the staff spoke English as a second language and had completed high school. The leads and supervisors were never given any formal leadership training. The department had been downsized through attrition over the past several years and there was distrust between management levels in the organization that resulted in blaming, scapegoating and frustration. There were long standing conflicts with other departments that seemed unresolvable. The whole city had just begun a program to create more collaboration between departments.

Consulting Intervention. We met with senior managers to review their expectations for themselves and their supervisors. They provided feedback about the training program and a focus group agenda. An initial set of best practices suggested by management was used to gather further input from the supervisory staff.

Several small focus groups organized by function were conducted with supervisors and leads. The meetings were designed to appreciate their on-the-job experience and give them a chance to discuss real situations that would form the basis for case studies. This helped to demonstrate that the training was going to be practical and immediately applicable. Also, the focus groups helped to create the honest relationships that the supervisors needed for cohort learning.

At the start of the focus group, a rationale and description of the program and schedule was presented by a senior manager. Groundrules for learning and best practices supervisory experiences were solicited. Each group was given a list of best practices and asked for feedback about the items under development. Finally, pre-work instructions for developing a case study and for completing a survey instrument were provided.

The supervisor's best practice suggestions were used to improve the list of best practices. After several drafts, the best practices were categorized and developed into a survey instrument. Each participant completed the survey prior to training. The results were summarized and presented for validation at the training.

Last Line. When building a program where natural resistance to training is paramount, using a focus group is a way to begin building program face validity and commitment to peer learning.