

Lab News Filename: Advanced Sales Training

Reviewers: Mary Monson, Denise Koker, Linda Houston (director)

Photos: yes (8/7 AST class)

Sandia's AST program aims to equip researchers with key "sales" tools

By Mike Janes

Let's face it: 'sales' and 'marketing' are, traditionally, unsavory concepts at Sandia. "We're scientists, engineers, and technical researchers," the argument goes. "We don't 'sell' or 'market' things."

So what is a program called "Advanced Sales Training" (AST) doing at Sandia?

In short, it's all about creating and maintaining a pool of skilled business developers at the lab who are trained to win and retain significant new business for Sandia. Says Partnerships Development manager Mary Monson (10114), who helped start the program back in 2001 in New Mexico: "Part of Sandia's broader mission is to ensure that the nation is fully benefiting from the vast array of capabilities the lab possesses, and AST speaks directly to that undertaking. The program is also an acknowledgement that generating new business is an actual skill, something that even the best and the brightest need to learn," said Mary.

The AST curriculum consists of training classes, seminars, application clinics and workshops, and individual or team coaching. Classes are designed to teach concepts and build a common language, while seminars, clinics and workshops expose students to broader issues, decision-making processes, and generate business-specific application discussions. Coaching is available to help participants apply skills and concepts to specific business development situations.

AST's genesis, Mary said, started with Kathleen Schulz (00225) as far back as the 1990s. Kathleen, who had come to Sandia from Hewlett-Packard, saw the need for the lab to modify and expand its mission space, and slowly began to put together training classes in

collaboration with the Education & Training department. Once Al Romig (00004) and Jim Tegnelia (12190) agreed to champion the concept, Advanced Sales Training was off and running. Maria Weddige-Gurney (10114) now administers the program for Sandia/New Mexico.

The Advanced Sales Training program, said Mary, has seen clear impacts. A 2006 report by Perspectives (a consulting company that works with Sandia), *Measured Impacts of Advanced Sales Training*, asserted that “a strong base of evidence from interviewees shows that their training led to numerous behavior changes that favorably affected business development results.”

California adds its own AST “twist”

Denise Koker (8529) serves as manager of the business development support group at Sandia/California. Site leadership, she said, has been thinking earnestly about “division development” for Division 8000 over the past couple of years, and watching from afar the success Mary and her colleagues have had with AST. Building on that success while adding a few unique wrinkles – noting that only four Division 8000-based staff members out of a total of 130 AST participants had gone through AST training in the past – Denise began working with California site management last year to deploy AST to small, targeted teams consisting of six staff members each. The teams are each led by a manager.

“One of our main priorities was to put together small teams that represented a good mix of technical and business expertise,” said Denise. While technical savvy was a given, she said, individuals with business experience were placed on each team to ensure balance.

Denise said Sandia/California’s management team carefully selected the teams based on specific site initiatives. The teams include Bio-Fuels Strategic Partnership; Decision Analysis & Support; Rad/Nuc Countermeasures; Physical Protection; Information Operations & Data Analysis; and Fiber Laser-based Subsystems.

“Business intelligence” drives AST

“At the heart of AST is the gaining of ‘business intelligence,’ which involves strong listening skills and a better understanding of what a potential customer really needs,” said Denise. “Whereas in the past we may have gone to a customer with a bag full of ideas and capabilities that we hoped might match their needs, AST shows us how to discover the customer’s needs by asking the right questions, listening carefully, and crafting solutions that are specific to the problems faced by that customer.”

Nathan Spencer (8774), a mechanical engineer whose department works on structural dynamics and multi-physics modeling and simulations, has been a part of the Rad/Nuc Countermeasures AST class since last September. He says the program has been especially helpful in understanding the “discovery” process that Denise describes.

“Sometimes there’s a temptation to do ‘technology push’ with customers where we encourage them to look at those capabilities that we’ve historically been good at,” said Nathan. “That’s our usual ‘comfort zone’ since those capabilities and technologies are what we do and what we feel most at ease with. But that’s not necessarily what the customer needs. Instead, AST has helped me to understand the customer’s own pressures and goals, which in turn can help to better apply our technologies to suit their objectives.”

Nathan also indicated that presentations from Sandia/New Mexico AST programs instructors have been valuable, particularly a class led by senior manager Michael Daily (12340). “The models of program development Michael focused on paralleled with the overall business and research structure of Sandia,” said Nathan. “Those processes are logically appealing, and the examples he shared of their successful implementation provided a certain level of credibility.” Nathan pointed out that because instructors like Michael share an appreciation for Sandia’s unique culture and business models, they’ve been able to impart some telling experiences with newer students such as Nathan.

**AST future to include more industry “best practices”,
other curriculum options**

Division 8000 has chosen to conduct fewer traditional training classes, instead focusing on more in-depth consulting to meet specific needs of each team. Other curriculum options are being explored as well; Krystal Kelley (8522), University Programs Administrator & Course Manager, is engaged with the University of California-Berkeley Haas School of Business to develop an even more integrated and comprehensive AST initiative.

“As the business development climate continues to evolve, so will the AST program,” says Maria Weddige-Gurney, alluding to both the Albuquerque and California sites. “The program tailors the course offerings based on listening to the participants. We try to practice what we preach by giving the participants course offerings they are interested in, and by trying to present similar information to them in different ways in order to reach different people in ways they can best understand.” The lab is trying to incorporate best practices from industry and other labs, Maria says, so that we can start to step outside the mindset of ‘Sandia is different and what everyone else does doesn’t apply.’

Denise said, too, that her intent is for continued development of the AST program at the California site, and that she hopes AST helps increase the discipline and “intentionality” by which Division 8000 – and all of Sandia – conducts its business development activities. “Whether it’s the federal sector or industry, we need to be more effective, more efficient, and more deliberate in our approach. AST can help us to become the broad national security laboratory that our leadership envisions.”

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