

Training: Use It or Lose It

by Tom Warney

It was a good program. Jan and Ernie enjoyed the two days of training, even though they had to play “catch-up” for a week after. The instructors were fun and knew what they were talking about. The ideas and discussions were great; it was interesting to find that others had similar challenges and new ideas. At the end, Jan and Ernie gave the program high marks, and felt that they were ready to start applying all this good stuff.

Three weeks later, Jan and Ernie meet in the coffee room. The conversation comes quickly around to the training they both had and enjoyed.

“I sure wish they’d have trained my **manager**,” Jan moans. “He hasn’t got a clue what I’m trying to do, and he hasn’t got the time to listen!”

“Yeah,” Ernie responds, “me, too. The ideas were great, but I can’t seem to get lift-off.”

“Half the time I can’t remember to do what I learned in the program, anyway. I need something to remind me.”

“And there was too much theory, now that I think back. What I **really** need to know is how to get this stuff done!”

“No-one else seems to be making changes, that’s for sure. I feel frustrated.”

“We may as well just give up,” concludes Ernie.

“Yeah,” Jan sighs, “Let’s have another coffee.”

This scenario is all too typical. The training program is wanted, needed and well-attended. The participants learn a lot, and want to use what they’ve learned. But, within a very short time, the “transfer of training” curve goes flat, the participants are no longer motivated, and nothing much changes.

Why? How does this happen? And, most importantly, How can we fix it?

Let’s start by examining why people learn. First, they have to perceive a need; it has to “hurt” somewhere for someone to understand that they need a better way. Second, they have to perceive that the program offered is one that will meet their need or needs. There has to be “buy-in”, the answer to the all-important “What’s In It For Me?” question. Third, the program itself — seminar, workshop, self-study, web-based — has to be well-structured, well-presented and built solidly on proven adult learning principles.

When these conditions are met, the result is learning. Applied learning, or behavioural change, should logically follow. To find out why behavioural change often does not follow, let's ask what happens **immediately** after the program.

The "Hawthorne Effect", named after workplace experiments done in the early 1900s, described the fact that workers' productivity often improved substantially simply due to the fact that someone was paying attention to them. In training, a similar "glow" of having been one of those participating in a learning program often carries over into the workplace for some time, **if** the participants find support and are able to use their new skills and approaches.

Donald Kirkpatrick, the guru of training evaluation, notes that training programs can be evaluated at 4 "levels": Level 1, the immediate feedback form or "smile sheet"; Level 2, testing for learning; Level 3, measuring actual behavioural changes on the job; and Level 4, examining how the training has ultimately affected the organization's "bottom line." In simpler terms: Did they like it? Did they learn it? Are they using it? Was it worth it to the organization?

Assuming that Level 1 feedback has indicated a well-designed, well-done and well-received course, the problems seem to start at Level 2. When the participant returns to the workplace, it is **assumed** that he or she has "learned something" about the subject area. But, often because those to whom they report are not totally clear about the program's subject matter, and therefore are not able to spot or support changes, there is no "testing", formal or informal, about what the participant has learned.

The same is true of Level 3 evaluation. It is difficult to really tell if positive behavioural change has occurred as a result of the training if the immediate supervisors or managers do not know what to look for and encourage. And with this "roadblock" in place, it is unlikely that a Level 4 evaluation will be able to tell us whether the training was worth the time, money and resources by improving actual productivity and the bottom line for the organization, because we won't have a valid way of linking the training to actual results. (Recent surveys, though, indicate that top executives do accept the value of good training as a contributor to the bottom line of their organizations, even without formal analysis.)

And so it appears that the first complaint of many training participants — "You need to train my manager!" — is often a valid one.

People need support. They need to know that they can share and work to implement what they bring back from training in an understanding and encouraging environment. Managers who have taken the course themselves as part of the team, or who have taken a related course at their level — one that emphasizes coaching and support skills — have a much better opportunity to make the most of their people's learning.

Management guru Ken Blanchard used to say, “Catch me doing something right!” No-one wants to try something new in an atmosphere of misunderstanding, suspicion or apathy. We need to be helped along, given appreciation and rewards, formally or informally. If it turns out to be actually more rewarding to stick with the old way than to try the new, there is no motivation for change.

STEP ONE, then, is: **Train the system, not just individuals.** Train in teams. Have special programs or briefings for higher levels. Exchange points of view and learn each other’s expectations. Build a supportive system that encourages risk and positive change.

When participants return to the job and want to implement new learnings, another barrier to success can be a lack of follow-up and coaching. Even when managers or executives know what the training is about, they may not have had the opportunity to develop the skills of coaching, supporting and encouraging. In stressful environments, there is a tendency to revert to the old “command and control” style that often crushes initiative, innovation and motivation. Today’s coaching model requires special skills that can be quickly learned and immediately used effectively for greatly improved morale as well as productivity. A good “coaching manager” will set up circumstances with participants to test and use their new learnings. This allows for an informal and experiential Level 2 and 3 evaluation of the training.

STEP TWO is: **Follow Up and Coach.** Let people apply their learning. Support them as they do this. Let them make mistakes; work with them to integrate innovative approaches. If managers or executives don’t yet have the skills of coaching and supporting, give them the means to learn. (And, too, the reverse of “Train my manager” applies here: When a manager learns coaching skills in a training program, it is important for those he will be coaching to know what to expect and how to support the manager in his or her new approach.)

At the level of the training program itself, there are some very effective ways that trainers, training designers and training managers can help ensure that, once a supportive environment is in place, learnings will transfer to the job.

First, ensure that your program is well-designed, built on solid adult learning principles, with lots of process options. Use advanced teaching-learning methods. Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) training techniques use methods including context learning, suggestion, visualization, mental practice and positive languaging to promote good results. Accelerated Learning techniques ensure that all styles of learning are accommodated, and that sound, colour, space and other modalities are effectively used to support learning. Mix traditional training methods with kinetic (body) learning exercises, peer coaching, mental imaging work, and some fun, off-the-wall activities.

Build on the group's own concerns and challenges. Participants are more motivated and creative when it comes to problems and situations that they recognize and deal with every day than they are by some dry general examples. Some advance survey work and polling the participants in class will reveal their challenges and ensure that the "What's In It For Me?" and "Why Should I Buy?" questions are answered.

Use practice sessions, role plays and other participative methods that let participants act "as if" they are using their learning on the job. Let them work out what the problems and possible solutions may be. Give them the opportunity to "coach" each other.

STEP THREE, then, is: **Build Performance into the Program.** Use everything you can to focus on transfer of learning to the job itself. Presuppose that positive change will occur and support their ideas as to how to apply their learnings. Help participants get rid of any "Victim" or "Blaming" attitudes in favour of "Action" and "Responsibility" modes that focus on positive results and rewards.

Yes, it is a challenge to do all this, especially when there are deadlines and budgets to be met, when everyone has more to do than ever, and when change is a daily occurrence. But ask yourself this question to quickly get things in perspective: Are we training people to waste money and create frustration? Or are we committed to helping people develop the skills and approaches essential for meeting our current and future challenges?

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