

The Neglected Half of Training

BY DONALD F. MICHALAK

Successful training involves two phases: the acquisition and the maintenance of behavior. This fact, while getting lip service from industrial trainers, has seldom received the practical attention it deserves. Too often, trainers have put all their efforts into the acquisition-of-skill portion of the training. When one program was completed, there usually was another problem waiting to be solved (with still another training program!). Trainers seldom had the time or interest to follow up on the first program.

Thus, when managers looked at on-the-job performance, they often found that the newly acquired skills were not being put into practice once the participants left the classroom. One result of this has been that over the years training has acquired a reputation of being a "nice thing to do" when there is extra time or money. When, however, the economic belt gets tightened, training is one of the first places an organization cuts back. Trainers are too often looked upon as ivory-tower types who have no influence in the "real" world, or simply as clericals who handle the paperwork for various company programs.

Recently, some concerned trainers have begun to fight this situa-

tion. When confronted by a manager demanding a training program, they began asking some of the right questions,¹ e.g.,

- What is the performance discrepancy?
- Could the employees perform to standard if their lives depended on it?
- Do they get regular feedback about performance?
- Is the employee punished for performing as expected? etc.

In addition to helping the trainer design a program with behavioral objectives that attack the real problems, the answers to these questions have sometimes led the trainers to recommend that no training is required. Frequently the problem is not a lack of skill or knowledge in the employees; often, the problem is somewhere in the system. Something is preventing the employees from doing the things they already know how to do. This is where the concept of maintenance of behavior comes into play.

Maintenance of Behavior

Maintenance of behavior is anything which keeps an acquired skill or knowledge up to a performance standard, e.g., getting feedback on the quality of one's work, and having the opportunity to use the skills. These positive consequences maintain behavior by providing valued rewards to trained em-

ployees.

In situations where the performance deficiency is not a result of a lack of skill or knowledge in the employees, but of something in the system that prevents the employee from using those skills or knowledge, performance can be brought up to the standard solely through the techniques used in maintenance-of-behavior systems. An example of this is an incident involving a teacher in a Job Corps center who wanted his students to keep their shoes polished and their clothes neat.² He correctly ascertained that they knew how to do these things, and so simply by the use of positive reinforcement he was able to induce the trainees to make dramatic changes in their appearance.

In order to learn more about maintenance - of - behavior activities, we conducted a study in six offices of a major division of a large manufacturing company.

The primary question to be answered was what happened when various maintenance-of-behavior activities were implemented after an interpersonal skills training program was conducted for supervisors.

Some specific questions we hoped to answer were these:

- 1) What activities provide maintenance of behavior?
- 2) What are the effects of involvement / non-involvement of

management in the maintenance-of-behavior activities?

3) When should a program of maintenance be started in relation to the training program?

4) What effect does a change in management have on an organization's maintenance-of-behavior program?

5) What is the role of the trainer in a maintenance-of-behavior program?

The methodology of this study was as follows:

1) The management of the industrial organization used in this study was briefed on maintenance-of-behavior concepts.

2) The supervisors and subordinates of the six subject offices completed a questionnaire which focused on their perceptions of

- the organizational climate
- supervisor - subordinate relationships
- their work
- various problem areas, e.g., performance reviews, overtime, communications, etc.

3) The supervisors and managers of the six subject offices attended an interpersonal-skills workshop.

4) One month after the workshop, the questionnaire was again completed by the supervisors and employees of the six subject offices.

5) The data from Questionnaires I and II were analyzed and the results were fed back to the management of the six subject offices.

6) With the help of training personnel, the managers of the six offices designed and implemented maintenance-of-behavior activities for their personnel.

7) Six months after the workshop, the supervisors and employees of the six offices completed the questionnaire a third time.

8) The maintenance-of-behavior activities of the six offices were analyzed and evaluated.

9) The data from the three questionnaires were analyzed and compared to the maintenance-of-behavior activities of each of the offices.

10) Recommendations were

made to management based on the results of these analyses.

Maintenance-of-Behavior Activities Used

The maintenance-of-behavior activities used in this study are in three categories:

- A) Those used as a part of the training session.
- B) Those used by managers whose offices showed an improvement in the questionnaire results.
- C) Those used by managers whose offices showed a decrease in the questionnaire results.

A) A number of activities were included in the workshop in an attempt to assist participants in making the transfer from the classroom to the job. Among them were these:

1. The top level managers sat in on a part of the workshop and made statements of positive expectations to the participants.
2. The content of the program

had a strong face validity in terms of the "real world" problems faced daily by the participants.

3. Every participant had been involved in the needs analysis part of the training process, and this data was used in the workshop.

4. The final exercise was a transfer - to - the - job module in which the participants made specific plans to use the skills learned in the workshop to deal with difficult "back-home" problems.

B) The managers of the three offices which showed improvements in the questionnaire data showed a great deal of interest in the study. When the results of the needs analysis were reported, one of them made an immediate decision to begin working on solutions to the problems identified. The trainers coordinating the workshop never had any difficulty getting a meeting with these managers. In addition to this general enthusiasm, they used more specific activities aimed at maintaining behavior than did the man-

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agers of the other three offices. Among the activities used were these:

1. Management and supervisory personnel met regularly to work on the problems identified in the workshop. Eventually, the groups met by work sections in order to focus on local problems. The results of these sessions were regularly disseminated to all employees.

2. Systemic changes relating to the problems identified were made. It was well advertised that these changes were the result of the feedback given by the workshop participants, e.g., report writing system was revised to eliminate unnecessary typing, weekly assignment review meetings were held, analysts were allowed to make presentations of their own material to top management, office space was rearranged, etc.

3. Task forces were set up to re-evaluate the function of the office and to clarify the responsibilities of each section and unit.

4. The training department was asked to conduct an after-hours training program, highlighting the following areas:

- overcoming resistance to change
- listening skills
- the art of constructive criticism
- motivating employees
- giving instructions

All of the supervisors and managers of the offices which had the best results attended these sessions.

5. Non-supervisory personnel were given more responsibility for the work they performed, especially in terms of being included in the planning and evaluation meetings.

6. One office manager "tightened up work practices." In an attempt to clarify communications, he let it be known that lunch times, quitting times, breaks, etc. would be strictly enforced.

7. The office managers participated personally in many of the activities rather than just giving

approval.

C) In general, the managers of the three offices which ranked lowest on the results of the three questionnaires tended to show little interest in the project. Statements like "We have no problem," or "We're already doing that" were not uncommon. In response to a request for a meeting to discuss starting some maintenance-of-behavior activities, the manager whose office scored the worst on the questionnaires said, "That can cause more harm than good. Let sleeping dogs lie."

Some specifics noted in these offices were these:

1. Immediately after the problem identification session, one manager held an office luncheon at which he discussed some of the problems. Because of an increased workload, however, there was no follow-up to this initial effort.

2. The supervisors of one office requested follow-up meetings to discuss the problems identified. These meetings were held but

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none of the managers attended.

3. Midway through the maintenance-of-behavior phase of the program, there was a change of management in two of the offices. The new managers did not follow-up on any maintenance activities their predecessors had started.

4. None of the managers or supervisors of the two offices which ranked lowest on the questionnaire data attended any of the follow-up training sessions.

Conclusions

The conclusions drawn from an analysis of the data are these:

1) a. Anything done by the manager which is perceived as an indication that "The boss is interested in this training program," or that "He/She is serious about our doing these things," will serve to maintain behavior.

The activities of the office which clearly ranked the highest in all categories especially support this conclusion. The manager of this office, acknowledging that the perception of the employees is an

important ingredient in a maintenance-of-behavior program, held meetings regularly to apprise all personnel of the things he was doing to maintain behavior.

b. One effective form of maintenance of behavior is asking the participants in the program what they feel are the obstacles to on-the-job application of the skills they have learned in the training. In the most improved office the very act of identifying the obstacles was perceived by employees as an indication that management is "really interested" in what happens on the job after the training program.

c. Maintenance-of-behavior activities which relate directly to problems identified by the participants as obstacles to their using the skills learned at a workshop are most effective in maintaining behavior. This was seen clearly in the maintenance-of-behavior activities instituted in the most improved offices. They were consistently related by the managers to the need for better interpersonal

relationships between the supervisor and the subordinate, which was the objective of the original training.

d. Maintenance-of-behavior activities are not always those which are generally recognized as positive activities. An example of this was seen in the office where the office manager tightened up work practices. He let it be known that lunch times, quitting times, starting times, etc. would be strictly enforced, and he proceeded to make it a personal task to see to it that all of his managers and supervisors did indeed tighten up on the work practices. Despite this "hard line" policy, the data indicated that the positive effects of the training program were maintained well. Investigation showed that the employees perceived the changes as a signal that the "boss is finally interested in what we are doing."

2) The quality and quantity of management's commitment to the concepts and practice of maintenance of behavior are critical factors in the effectiveness of the training

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effort. In the offices where the effects of the training were most positive, the key managers and the subordinate managers were personally involved in many of the maintenance-of-behavior activities. This involvement was visible to all members of the office. On the other hand, the managers of the two offices which ranked lowest made a conscious decision not to be involved in maintenance activities. In both offices the perceptions of the participants were worse six months after the training than before the training. This may have been a factor of the expectancy theory, i.e., the participants anticipated some changes as a result of the training, and when these changes did not materialize, their perceptions deteriorated.

3) a. Efforts toward maintenance of behavior can be made prior to the training program. The manager of the most improved office held meetings with his supervisors prior to the workshop. At these meetings, a tentative maintenance system was develop-

ed based on the objectives of the workshop.

b. Maintenance-of-behavior activities once begun must be continued in order to be effective. For example, in one office, the department manager immediately held an office luncheon at which he discussed some of the problems identified, but he did not follow up on the problems. The data improved in many areas on questionnaire II, but reverted to the original level on questionnaire III.

c. The question of whether maintenance-of-behavior activities can be implemented successfully after a lapse of several months remained unanswered by the data of this study. None of the managers involved made such an attempt, and since this was not a laboratory study, the trainers were unable to make such an attempt happen.

4) Continuing a maintenance-of-behavior program through a change in managers is difficult. Unless a new manager actively attempts to maintain the behavior of

his/her employees, the change in management is seen by the employees as an end to the maintenance-of-behavior program. Two offices experienced a change of managers during the course of this study. Attempts to "bring the new manager into the picture" were unsuccessful. The new managers appeared to be so concerned about doing well in their new positions that they made no attempt to continue any of the maintenance-of-behavior activities of their predecessors. The data indicated clearly that the employees of these offices did not maintain their learned behavior after the change of managers.

5) The role of the industrial trainer should be that of a catalyst in helping managers understand what maintenance-of-behavior is and what managers can do to help maintain the behavior of the people who work for them.

Trainers who attempt to force maintenance activities on unwilling managers will be as unsuccessful as trainers who force workshops on managers who do not see the need for the training.³

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to managers and trainers:

1. The basic recommendation for management resulting from this study was this: *If a manager does not intend to invest time, energy, and money in a program designed to maintain the skills and knowledge gained by employees at a given training program, he/she ought not invest time, energy, or money in training in the first place.* While this may appear to be harsh, the conclusions of this study strongly suggest that unless participants have some evidence that their manager is interested in and concerned about their using the acquired skills on the job, there may be decrease in the use of those skills, perhaps to a point which is worse than the original situation which evoked the need for the training.

2. A manager, who does something which he/she expects to help maintain behavior, ought to announce this fact to all participants.

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If this is not done, he/she is taking a risk that the participants will see the occurrence as a chance happening. Then, rather than having the idea that their managers are interested in their practicing the skills learned the employees may not notice the activity, or they may think, "It's about time management did that!" without perceiving the activity as being connected in any way to the skills learned at the training program. This risk is unnecessary and ought to be avoided.

3. Whenever possible following a training program for employees, a manager should do the following things in staff meetings:

a) Begin using the terminology and concepts learned at the training program.

b) Phrase questions in terms recognized by the staff as coming from the training session.

c) Refuse to accept answers which are not similarly phrased.

4. Maintenance-of-behavior activities should be a part of the workshop. In addition to the four mentioned previously, here are a few more in-class activities that can help maintain behavior of participants:

a) *Practice* — If the participant has the opportunity to practice the skills and get feedback on that practice, he/she is more likely to use the skills on the job.

b) *Letter to self* — Participants write a letter to themselves about on-the-job applications. This letter is mailed to participants about two months after the workshop.

c) *Participant involvement* — Participants who are involved in the learning process are more likely to integrate the skills/knowledge learned into their everyday behavior.

d) *Ideas-Applications notebook* — Participants maintain a notebook of key ideas learned and possible on-the-job applications throughout the workshop.

e) *Real work* — Let participants perform real work as a part of training, e.g., process real claims rather than made-up practice sets.

f) *Whole department attends* — This gives everyone the same terminology, ideas, etc. so that

they can reinforce each other on the job.

g) *Debriefing with management* — At the end of the workshop participants discuss on-the-job applications with their bosses. Included in this discussion is the system / management support needed.

5. On-the-job maintenance of behavior activities should be used. Seven of these were mentioned previously. (These were used by managers of the three offices which showed improvement.) There are many other on-the-job activities which will help to maintain the behavior of participants. Among them are:

a) *Positive reinforcement by the boss* — Next to the intrinsic reward of doing something well, recognition from one's boss may be the single most powerful maintenance activity.

b) *Buddy systems* — Two participants meet regularly after the workshop to coach and counsel each other on using the skills on the job. These should be short (10 minute) meetings.

c) *Awards, certificates* — The boss should give out a completion certificate when the participant has completed an on-the-job application.

d) *Meetings with boss before/after* — A five-minute meeting before the session to discuss objectives, and a 10-minute meeting after to discuss what was learned and on-the-job applications.

e) *Performance appraisals* — The use of learned skills should be mentioned on the participant's next performance review.

f) *Job aids* — Learning aids used in the classroom should be available on the job.

g) *Follow-up evaluations/audits* — Trainers can evaluate whether participants perceive the material learned is useful on the job. In addition to evaluating the results, this will help maintain behavior.

h) *Self-checking* — Participants can graph their progress on the job in order to see their improvement.

i) *Support groups* — Participants meet for lunch or after work to provide each other support in applying new skills. This is espe-

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cially useful in interpersonal skills training, e.g., assertiveness programs.

j) *Protected environment* — For some time after the initial training, new employees work with a trainer as supervisor as they build productivity to 100 percent.

k) *Updates* — Previous participants are sent new material as it is developed for a training program.

l) *Training newsletter* — This is sent to all participants.

6. Efforts aimed at maintenance of behavior should begin as a part of the pre-training activities. As soon as the behavior changes are identified in the needs analysis phase of the training program, management should begin to develop ways to maintain the anticipated behaviors.

7. Managers should think in terms of getting answers to the following questions when investigating the needs for a training program:

a) Could employees do it if they really had to?

b) Do they get regular feedback about how well they perform?

c) Can I change the job by providing some kind of job aid?

d) What is the consequence of performing as desired?

e) Is it punishing to perform as expected?

f) Does performing as desired matter to the employee?

Sometimes the answers to these questions will show there is no need to train anyone. When employees already have the skills or knowledge, performance can be improved simply by using an appropriate maintenance-of-behavior activity.

8. Because of the importance the boss has in maintaining behavior in any employee - change program, training aimed at improving managerial performance ought to have heavy doses of subjects like: contingency management, shaping, behavior modification, and positive reinforcement. In the motivation portions of managerial training, trainers ought to include, and perhaps even concentrate on, the work done by Skinner and McClelland.

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