

"MANY 'HOW-TO-SELL TRAINING' PROBLEMS CAN BE OVERCOME THROUGH A SYSTEM OF EVALUATION WHICH HELPS STRUCTURE THE COMMUNICATION OF TRAINING INFORMATION IN A USEFUL AND PALATABLE FORM."

PROFESSIONALISM VS. SALESMANSHIP: FOCUSING ON EVALUATION PROCEDURE AT JOHN DEERE

BY KARL A. HICKERSON AND HARRY E. LITCHFIELD III

Few company trainers find it easy or desirable to pass up opportunities for "selling" training among open-minded members of the larger organization. It's no coincidence that every successful training department has at least one member with a flare for marketing its programs. Let's face it, training "enthusiasm" is a key to organizational survival for trainers.

Yet as professionals, we are aware that training cannot solve all problems. Recent literature overflows with the suggestion that trainers be human performance problem analyzers first . . . and then provide the learning experience *only* in those rare cases when it's appropriate.

How can we reconcile training salesmanship with professionalism? All of us have had clients (or at least students) who have needed some "help" identifying their needs in terms of our services. In fact, overzealous enthusiasm for training seems to be fairly widespread among trainers. In such cases, no

one can be certain that the decisions *to* train, and *what* to train, have been made on the basis of facts rather than salesmanship. What's the best approach to this dilemma? Taking our own professional advice, let's not assume that this *is* a problem to be solved through training. It's great to have trainers who can describe the limitations of training for solving organizational problems, and it's even better to work in an organization which is fluent in the language and techniques of human-performance problem analysis, but both situations are exceptional.

We suggest that reconciling salesmanship with professionalism *is* an important problem, but one which is best attacked as a "systems" difficulty, rather than as a problem involving either the client's deficiency in knowledge of training technology, or one related to our own abilities to sell training independently of the client's initial desires or needs. The "system" in this case is a method for objectively evaluating and communicating preliminary outcomes of individual training experiences.

Early results, from trial applications of this approach to evaluation, suggest that the "training professionalism *vs.* salesmanship dilemma" is largely caused by poor feedback from participants to management and the training staff. In fact, many "how-to-sell training" problems may be overcome through a system of evaluation which helps structure the communication of training information in a useful and palatable form. This evaluation system also has several interesting side benefits, not the least important of which is that a sound training philosophy may be more widely communicated within the company.

The evaluation system we wish to describe is an outgrowth of problems which typically surround the interface between training and line management. Consider, for example, the following misunderstandings which are likely to exist in some form whenever training is handled by a semi-isolated staff department:

- *Problem:* Line management abdicates responsibility for its employees' training. "What we need

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here is an effective training program. Don't we have a department to handle these things?"

• *Problem:* Management can't or won't support key behavior changes made during training. "Well, I'm not sure what the program was about, George, but we're sure expecting great things from you now!"

• *Problem:* Management doesn't accept the potential value of training as an intervention in a developing organization. "What can you show me about productivity that justifies me sending my people off to your training program?"

• *Problem:* Management doesn't understand the topics covered by the course in terms of its own needs. "Give 'em lots of that communications stuff; boy, they sure need that . . . but what the heck is 'team effectiveness critique?'"

• *Problem:* Management plain doesn't believe in training. "I don't know who told you what the content of that course should be, but it sure doesn't solve any real-world problems in my shop!"

• *Problem:* Management doesn't evaluate program effectiveness on an appropriate basis. "Bill said he enjoyed parts of the program, but Tuesday night was too long!"

How do you respond to such comments? The tendency is to respond by describing an approach to training which covers needs analysis, setting objectives, letting objectives dictate content and methods, and control the learning experience, and finally, something on evaluation. Plus maybe a little on why training is essentially a line responsibility which cannot be completely turned over to an isolated staff department. Given an aggressive mood, we might even be pushed to add something on why training is effective only when fully understood and supported by management! Having gone through these explanations a few times, a person begins to conclude that acceptance of the value of training is one gigantic "training" problem. Given that thought, program developers may be off and running with courses for everybody on the topic of the training function in organizations. But that approach, by

itself, is no more effective than teaching communications theory to poor communicators.

In fact these are not exclusively "training" problems, any more than it is useful to "hard sell" training the same way one would hard sell encyclopedias. Instead they are caused, most importantly, by lack of *feedback*: first, feedback to management about the program, in terms that management can understand; and second, feedback to instructors and program developers concerning the effectiveness of training, in terms that trainers understand. At John Deere, we've tried to attack these feedback problems through the evaluation system described below. A very promising side benefit is that the system seems to eliminate many misunderstandings about the nature of training and what it can and cannot do. But before that, a bit on what we feel evaluation is all about.

Evaluation:

Information and Accountability

Evaluation of training has many purposes in practice, but if we use the term in its traditional sense, it seems to gather information on how well something was accomplished in the past. The most important reasons anyone would want to look at the past is to identify how to make improvements in the future and to hold someone or some part of the training group accountable for improving its contribution. Without accountability, evaluation becomes merely a needs analysis for the next program. Without information, accountability is self-defeating. Evaluation quite often becomes a selling tool, because the key to management acceptance is demonstrating that training is an accountable service.

It is generally accepted that evaluation of training occurs on several levels: reaction or opinion, learning, behavior, and results. Surveys of training departments indicate most industrial training is evaluated through immediate participant reactions. Less is accomplished through measurement of learning or behavior, and very little is accomplished through results measured back on the job. Litera-

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ture also indicates that reaction or opinion measures are the least reliable and most narrowly focused of these approaches.¹

Although it is not apparent in many training evaluation strategies, the responsibility for evaluating training rests with several different parts of the organization. Training is, after all, a complex process. Program participants are in the best position to provide input concerning enjoyment, interest or perceived importance (reaction). While this is an important prerequisite for application back on the job, very general reactions or opinions can be unreliable as predictors of the effectiveness of program content for accomplishing objectives written in terms of on-the-job activities.

Similarly, training professionals are in the best position to evaluate learning in the classroom, but training people lack a good deal of credibility when they suggest their own programs were successful for eliminating problems on the job. An important group is usually overlooked. This group is composed of supervisors or managers of participants. Not only do these people have a major stake in training effectiveness, but they were also (hopefully) an important source for the needs information which was collected before the program was conceived. Most importantly, the supervisors of participants are the group to whom the training function as a whole is immediately accountable for the performance of its specialized service in any given program. They are also the group to whom participants are accountable for the application of newly acquired skills. Unfortunately management does not generally speak training language

and trainers don't spend enough time learning the job performance language of line managers.

The only bridge for this gap, of course, is the behavioral or measurable learning objective. Since evaluation is a matter of defining standards and then comparing actual performance against these standards, in the absence of better measures, one must rely on the program's objectives. In fact, evaluation of training is restricted by the quality of the needs analysis and development of objectives before the program. Perhaps the most important reason for carefully defining program objectives is that they must later serve as the criteria against which to measure the effectiveness of the program. Program objectives are the standards to which developers and instructors, and ultimately the entire training function, should be held accountable.

Creating Meaningful Objectives

The evaluation system we wish to describe is designed around program objectives. A good deal of effort goes into creating objectives which are meaningful to management and training specialists, so that they can serve as the basis for an understanding about exactly what services will be rendered. Later, participants and their supervisors or managers use the same objectives as a tool for providing feedback on how well these services were in fact rendered.

The system is currently being used as the immediate reaction phase of evaluation for five trainer-training and three first-level supervisor programs offered by the Deere & Co. Management Training Department.² In train-the-trainer programs, the system doubles as a demonstration of evalua-

tion principles, so that it can be used to make several "teaching points" about training evaluation.

The evaluation form for these programs is like the one in Figure 1. The instructions are the same, but (of course) the objectives are different for different programs. The three objectives presented in Figure 1 are from a hypothetical teaching techniques program. The checks and ratings on this form were made by John Doe, whose job involves classroom instruction.

Briefly, the system works like this:

1. As part of a package of pre-

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work, participants receive the objectives form (Figure 1) printed on three-part, pressure-sensitive paper. Instructions are to fill out columns 1 and 2, and bring the form to the program. Column 1 asks participants to discuss objectives with their supervisor and indicate which objectives are important for them individually. Column 2 asks participants to rank-order objectives they have indicated are important. This part of the procedure requires program candidates to consider all of the objectives, and allows each participant to freely commit to one, two or all of them, with the endorsement of his or her supervisor. Figure 1 indicates that John Doe was interested in objectives 1 and 3, but not in objective 2, and that he was more interested in objective 3.

2. At or near the beginning of the program objectives are discussed, participants are allowed to make changes in their rankings,

and then the first page of the three-part form is torn off and submitted to the instructors. This page is used as a reference during the program so that material can be individually tailored to the specific needs of each participant whenever possible. Participants are encouraged to refer to their priority listing of objectives periodically during the program.

3. At the end of the program, there is a brief discussion about program evaluation. Participants are asked to indicate in Column 3 the *appropriateness* of the program's objectives for their job. This is a rating on a scale of 1-5, and it includes those objectives they may not have checked as important prior to the program. This instruction is intended to allow for new insights acquired during the program, and to make the point that perceptions on the job may be quite different from perceptions in the classroom. Finally, each member of the group is asked to rate in

Column 4 the degree to which he or she *can do* the activity specified in the objective. A 1-5 scale is also used for this rating.

4. Participants are then asked to provide some additional comments concerning program content, methods and other suggestions, and tear off the second sheet to be passed to the instructors. Figure 1 shows that John Doe changed his mind about the appropriateness of objective 2 somewhat (seeing it as more appropriate than he did before), but that objectives 1 and 3 are still seen as "extremely" appropriate. His ratings show that he feels he is "very" able to conduct a session using videotape, but only "moderately" able to do the activities in objectives 4 and 6. On the other hand, these are not quite so important.

5. The remaining third sheet then contains a complete record of judgments concerning the importance of objectives before and after the program, and a copy of the seminar evaluation. This sheet is taken back to the job to serve as a basis for discussing the usefulness of the program with the participant's immediate supervisor. Participants are invited to solicit comments from their supervisors concerning any of the objectives and forward them to the Training Department. Follow-up interviews and assessment activities are also focused on the objectives.

This system provides much more than "good/bad" information. In fact it suggests actions to be taken in several different areas. For example, objectives which are high in importance or appropriateness, but low in "can do," are considered targets for improvement in methods or techniques. On the other hand, a good correlation between appropriateness and accomplishment indicates that emphasis has been placed in key areas. If only a few objectives are rated highly appropriate, we question the quality of needs analysis or the scheduling of participants, regardless of the "can do" ratings. We are currently gathering some data to help set criterion levels for each of these conclusions.

There are several other distinct

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merits to this method of program evaluation:

- The focus of the evaluation is not on instructor "presentation" skills, but rather on participant job skills. The system is not intended to substitute for more assessment-oriented measures of performance (such as the pre and posttest), but to be useful in training activities where rigorous learner performance appraisals can interfere with the impact of the program. Many evaluation systems interfere with the back-home application of training because they are essentially *instructor-oriented*. Pework activities and postprogram ratings pro-

vide information which is useful to instructors and developers, without suggesting that learners have no responsibility for program effectiveness.

- The criteria or standards for evaluating the program are established before the program. Management and program participants are allowed to commit themselves to these standards by freely indicating which ones are important for them. Instructors are aware that they are to be held accountable for meeting these standards.

- Since participants are much more qualified to rate their own ability to perform a specified acti-

vity than they are qualified to rate the value of training content, the system produces information with much more validity than typical end-of-course reactions. There is considerably less danger that positive ratings mean the program was merely entertaining. Open-ended comments about the program seem to carry more meaning under this system, because the objectives provide a common focus and terminology.

- The system separates evaluation of needs analysis from evaluation of teaching effectiveness. Often when participants are poorly selected, the whole program suf-

Figure 1.

"TEACHING TECHNIQUES"

A Pre-Work Evaluation Form

Instructions: Complete columns 1 and 2. Bring these materials with you to the program.

Name John Doe

Date 3/14/77

Program Objectives	1 Check (✓) which objectives are important for you	2 Rank order objectives you have checked (1 = most important)	3 (To be completed during the program)	4 (To be completed during the program)
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1. Given three simulated classroom situations, demonstrate how to control a guided discussion so as to achieve a predetermined objective.	✓	2	5	5
2. Given a model for analyzing performance problems, & a list of five descriptions of performance problems, determine which are caused by knowledge deficiency.			4	4
3. Demonstrate, through video-replay activities, a basic capability of conducting a simulated program using videotape as the primary medium.	✓	1	5	4
4.	✓	3	3	3
5.			3	5
6.	✓	4	3	3

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"THE DEERE EVALUATION SYSTEM PROVIDES BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF THE FUNCTION OF TRAINING IN THE ORGANIZATION BY STIMULATING MANAGEMENT PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS, RATHER THAN THROUGH TRAINING."

fers. Yet it's much better to identify this problem as one involving "inappropriate" objectives than to chalk it up to poor ratings, particularly from the point of view of instructors. Without an "appropriateness" rating, it's impossible to provide meaningful feedback to schedulers and enrollers in how they select people to attend courses. The prework phase in fact has caused several participants to select themselves out of a program because they "realized it wasn't relevant."

- The system eliminates the problem of how to interpret negative or positive feedback from isolated participants whose jobs do not require some of the activities simulated by the training. In addition, it eliminates the tendency of instructors to shrug off "bad marks" as a result of maverick participants.

- The system tends to increase contact between participants and their supervisors concerning mutual objectives and the application of skills developed during training. Since Column 3 of the form asks for a fresh look at what's important, the training department can have some input into these discussions through trained participants.

- The Deere evaluation system provides broader understanding of the function of training in the organization by stimulating management participation in the process, rather than through training. Since evaluation criteria are specified, there tends to be less abdication of responsibility by management for training needs assessment and evaluation.

- The system is standardized and adaptable to computer analysis, yet it provides different information from each program. The rating forms, scales, methods of analysis and computer output re-

main essentially the same between programs, but the rating activity and data are entirely different for different programs, because the objectives are different.

Where Can It Go Wrong?

Where can the system go wrong? One very critical place: *the objectives must be very carefully written!* Unless the objectives communicate the same activities to trainers, participants and managers, the system is useless. If objectives are not used as they should be, that is, if they are merely tacked on to add to the credibility of a "spray-and-pray" program, there of course is no more sense in evaluating the program with them than there was probably sense employed during their creation in the first place.

Highly technical objectives do not work any better with management than highly general ones, because the objectives must communicate specific, understandable and job-related activities. This is not to say that all objectives must be written at the same level of detail or skill. Just as there are immediate "enabling" objectives which must be met before broader, more important ones, program evaluation can be effectively accomplished using a series of objectives which differ considerably in breadth and importance. Like good test questions, however, they must be understandable.

But over the longer haul, even if the objectives start out weak, the system tends to build professionalism. Funny things begin to happen when managers and participants are allowed to provide feedback directly related to program objectives: the objectives get better! This happens under the current system because the same person (or group) who writes the objectives for a program at the begin-

"FUNNY THINGS BEGIN TO HAPPEN WHEN MANAGERS AND PARTICIPANTS ARE ALLOWED TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK DIRECTLY RELATED TO PROGRAM OBJECTIVES: THE OBJECTIVES GET BETTER!"

ning of its development is specifically evaluated against them, through the appropriateness rating, at the end. One's initial reaction to objectives rated low in appropriateness is to think the things aren't written in such a way that the program could get the high marks it deserved. An obvious response would be: "If the objectives aren't written correctly, the same must be true for the whole program!"

It's our experience that even when it's very clear what the objectives should be at the beginning of a program, it's not always a safe assumption that management and participants will agree with the same objectives at the end. The system is intended to allow for this possibility, by providing some accountability for the *entire* process, from needs analysis to program presentation, and in such a way that all parties are speaking the same language and the right information gets back to the right people.

There is no substitute for a systematic approach to training. But while it's accepted that the purpose of the evaluation part of the process is to provide useful feedback and accountability for each of the other steps, how to do that on a limited budget is another question. In the absence of nonsubjective measures, extensive follow-up, and control of extraneous variables, many evaluation systems still lack any specific standards for simple reaction-type measurements. Most evaluation systems do not separate evaluation of content from instruction, which makes it very difficult to translate comments into program changes.

In such cases, we feel the dilemma of professionalism *vs.* salesmanship becomes particularly acute, because it is not possible to demonstrate how training is to be held accountable for its services.

The result may be that "selling" is accomplished through unknown means, perhaps leaving some doubt about professionalism in the training department. We feel the system described here has some promise for easing this dilemma, by providing feedback and evaluation information on the basis of standards agreed upon by each participant and supervisor at the beginning of the program.

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2. Deere & Co. courses are also subject-

ed to follow-up evaluations, in the field, three-six months after their initial sessions, and periodically after they become fully operational.

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