



Providing Practice for Skill Development

By Gordon E. Mills and R. Wayne Pace

Practice, practice, practice." The most compelling words of parents as they encourage their children to master the skills of music, math, reading, or writing provide a clue for trainers: Practice is crucial to job-skill development.

Practice sessions, well-designed and thoughtfully implemented, are critical to achieving training goals and can become the foundation of a sound training program. Trainers, however, frequently don't know how to conduct practice activities effectively.

Trainers can strengthen their ability to design and implement practice sessions by considering the following

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nine questions about employees' performance deficiencies and the proper way to address them.

Question 1. *Is the performance deficiency a motivational issue?*

Often performance doesn't meet our expectations because the employee is not willing to devote the time and energy to achieve the expected skill level. The employee has the mental and motor ability and skills to do the job, yet has been distracted or has allowed other factors to interfere with job performance. Further, a review of the human factors associated with the person's performance might identify a problem for which solutions other than training are best suited. Thus a practice sequence might not be relevant.

Question 2. *Is it a skill deficiency?*

Determining a skill deficiency is a multiple task. Skills are complex sets of behaviors that must occur in a series. A deficiency could result either from an inability to perform one or more of the behaviors within the series or from ignorance of their correct sequence. After studying the employee's performance, you may decide that the deficiency is skill based. Let's assume for this example that there is sufficient evidence to identify this performance problem as a skill deficiency.

Question 3. *Can you identify the behaviors needed to correct the deficiency?*

Although you now know that the employee suffers a skill deficiency, identifying the deficient behavior still

will be difficult for two reasons. First, performance may vary among different situations. For example, a salesperson may be effective in closing a small sale but less able to handle larger deals. Studying the deficiency across a variety of situations helps locate the real problem area.

Second, the deficient behavior may go unnoticed because only the effect of the deficiency, rather than its cause, is apparent. For example, by examining the employee's failure to close a sale we focus our attention on only the end result of the skill deficiency and not on possible reasons for the failure. In the process, we overlook the employee's failure to pursue larger sales. Practicing the assertive behavior needed to close a larger sale would bear directly on the cause of the deficient behavior. To broaden the remedy for a skill deficiency, subdivide the deficiency by situation and focus on the cause of the inadequate performance.

Question 4. *Can you list the cognitive material needed to develop the skill?*

Once you recognize the deficient behavior, identify what knowledge the person must possess in order to perform the skill correctly. To do this, list the facts, concepts, and information that provide the mental preparation and background necessary for efficient performance.

Question 5. *Are cognitive materials available to teach the skill?*

If prepackaged, on-target training materials are available, use them. They are usually less expensive than those you would prepare. If nothing on the market is suitable, you'll need to design and write the materials. Search your files, published manuals, and vendor catalogs to discover the best available sources for teaching the skill.

Question 6. *Is the task complex?*

Complex tasks are more difficult to analyze and complete than simple ones because they involve both mental and motor skills. Mental development, however, precedes motor development. Therefore, the rehearsal of mental skills should precede the practice of motor skills. Trainers must learn the mental elements of the task before meaningful motor learning can occur. In addition, most complex tasks require that a series of behaviors be per-

formed in a well-defined sequence. As the sequence becomes more critical to performance, the complexity of the task increases—and the greater the effect on performance of mental- and motor-skill rehearsal.

Question 7. *Can the motor skills be rehearsed?*

Significant motor rehearsal and multiple practice activities are necessary for long-term skill retention. As the number of significant practice activities increases, performance is more likely to transfer to the work setting. You must provide both mental and motor rehearsals, or you will be unable to improve employees' skills.

Question 8. *Will the employee receive feedback?*

Rehearsals are more effective when employees receive feedback on their performance. Feedback can be offered in a number of ways such as through comments by colleagues and trainers

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and trainees' self-criticism. Unless you monitor employees' rehearsals, incorrect as well as acceptable behaviors may appear in job performance. The reinforcement of learning that feedback provides is as critical as reinforcement on the job, where coworkers, managers, and the organization aid the skill-transfer process. Without feedback and work-setting reinforcement, changes in behavior and performance are unlikely.

Question 9. *What type of feedback should you provide?*

When employees must unlearn old behaviors to permit improved skill performance, consider providing video feedback. Videotaping and reviewing the trainee's performance offer several significant benefits. For example, video can overcome employees' resistance to criticism and allow them to accept suggestions. Believing often demands seeing, and video feedback allows the employee to see the consequences of

specific behavior. This is often necessary to change old behaviors. To plan a video feedback session, see the sidebar "Providing Video Feedback."

When feedback is essential but video feedback is unavailable, review the learning goals and give the trainee additional examples of model performance. If nonverbal behavior is not critical to the skill, an audiotape recording can assist in the feedback session. Lastly, adding more practice activities to the rehearsal or additional on-the-job reinforcement may help you achieve results similar to those effected by video feedback.

Directing the practice session

With the nine questions answered, you are ready to begin the practice activity. Practice sessions will involve either mental or motor rehearsals and, in some cases, both. Both rehearsal types involve the following steps:

■ *Prepare the trainee for practice.* Let the trainee know that the skill is attainable and that you are interested in helping the trainee succeed. Create the trainee's desire to learn by relating the skill to the employee's on-the-job tasks.

■ *Set the pattern or sequence.* Skills represent a group of events occurring in a specific pattern. Therefore the rehearsal should include a step-by-step demonstration of the pattern, focusing on the skill's main steps and key points. Avoid giving too much information at one time. Use simple, direct language, and encourage the trainee to ask questions. Once you have demonstrated the pattern, display the skill performed at its normal speed and highlight the behaviors essential to proper performance. Don't compromise the standard you want the trainee to achieve. The trainee should see not only how quickly to perform the task, but how to complete the task well.

■ *Work gradually toward complex behaviors.* People form habits through repetition. Similarly, through guided practice and sensitive feedback, the trainee will build confidence in performing the new skill. During the process, begin with the simple behaviors and gradually work toward those that are more difficult. This is particularly important where mental rehearsal must precede motor rehearsal. As the practice session continues with repeated rehearsals, have the trainee explain why the skill is done in that particular way. Again, feedback is

Providing Video Feedback

With many skills, feedback must go beyond that provided by the trainer or trainees' peers. Allowing trainees to watch a videotape of their performance offers this broader capacity. Feedback that combines the suggestions of trainers and peers with videotaped skill performance is particularly useful for developing communication and interpersonal skills. In addition, trainees who receive video feedback in conjunction with the trainer's comments tend to be more positive about the skill development and less likely to reject recommendations for change.

Two considerations precede the videotaping of the skill performance: the placement of the video camera and the development of an observation form. Place the camera in a position that doesn't distract the trainee, yet make certain the camera will record the actions critical to performing the job. In some cases, a compromise between the concentration of the employee and the value of the skills captured on tape is necessary to allow a recording that will be useful for feedback. The observation form lists the actions the trainee will display in the practice activity. A form with a scaled measure (1 to 7, for example) under each of the key behaviors allows for quick evaluations. Include on the form a section for open-ended responses to list or describe comments you have about the performance.

Four steps are involved in conducting a video feedback session:

■ *Prepare the trainee for feedback.* As in the practice session, you must put the trainee at ease by explaining this segment of the development process. Point out that you are not a judge, but that you are there to help. By outlining the

events that will follow and assuring the trainee that the feedback is confidential, you can help foster rapport between you and the trainee.

■ *View the tape.* Focus the trainee's attention on the skill performance by reviewing the observation form together, indicating the key behaviors that the trainee should note. Make sure that peripheral concerns, such as personal grooming, don't distract the employee.

■ *Conduct the evaluation.* While viewing the taped skill performance, offer suggestions for improvement similar to those you provided earlier during the practice session. Make specific comments on areas of weakness and strength; video equipment often includes pause and slow-motion features that allow for closer scrutiny of behaviors within the skill. Again, critique behavior rather than the individual, and show warmth and concern for the trainee. Allow the participant to evaluate and comment on the taped performance as a means of self-feedback.

■ *Offer postviewing comments.* Once the tape has stopped, ask the trainee how you can help in improving the skill performance. Assume that the trainee wants to improve and that you are providing needed assistance. Point out the satisfaction you feel as the trainee improves. In turn it will create a positive feeling that remains with the trainee after the session is over.

If you ensure that the participant feels at ease during the feedback session and focus your critique on the behavior rather than on the trainee, the session should produce more effective skill development.

Focus on the cause rather than the effects of inadequate performance

essential. Correct errors and omissions as the trainee makes them. Rather than criticize, demonstrate how the trainee can more effectively execute the correct behavior. Avoid correcting too frequently and use good judgment about when and how to provide feedback.

■ *Examine how well the trainee has learned the skill.* Allow the trainee to perform the skill without your help. Again, encourage questions about specific patterns or events within the behavior sequence. Connect your comments about the trainee's development to standards of excellence and point out any progress the trainee makes. As performance improves, reinforce your pride in the trainee's achievements. Review areas of excellence as well as of weakness and encourage the trainee to strengthen the skill through additional practice.

Better training transfer

Practice is a key part of training, but one you must structure carefully. By reviewing the nine questions suggested, you will possess a sound basis for deciding when to use practice activities and which activities are most appropriate for the targeted skill. Properly conducting the practice session and then providing meaningful feedback are critical to the transfer of the skill to the work environment. Opportunities for practice, offered in training, can help make that transfer permanent.