

"HOWEVER EXCELLENT YOUR CLASSROOM TRAINING, WITHOUT GOOD COACHING YOU ARE PROBABLY WASTING 87 CENTS OUT OF EVERY SKILLS DOLLAR YOU SPEND!"

# THE COACHING CONTROVERSY

BY NEIL RACKHAM

I've overheard some curious conversations in airports, but rarely so intriguing as one that took place in Los Angeles between two ASTD members:

"Did you read the article on coaching in the August edition of the *Training and Development Journal*?"

"Yeah, on-the-job versus off-the-job. Some hard research for a change."

"It really shook-up my ideas on coaching. It proved to me that coaching doesn't work and seminars are better."

"I'm glad I saw it. We've been planning next year's program and we'd angled a lot of our training toward on-the-job coaching, but now I'm not so sure."

"I can't tell you this. On-the-job training is messy as hell. Now I can prove it doesn't work, I'm going back to the good old classroom approach."

"Yeah. I'll probably do the same."

I've been part of a team carrying

out research into coaching effectiveness for the last seven years, so the moment my plane landed in D.C. I rushed to my office to read the first research study I'd ever heard of which proved that coaching didn't work.

## A Dangerous Misconception

I've read Jack Kondrasuk's article and I'm worried. Although he's scrupulously careful not to suggest that coaching is ineffective, I'm sure that many *Journal* readers will, like the pair in Los Angeles, draw some nasty conclusions. Because the decision of whether to use on- or off-the-job training methods is so fundamental, I would like to present some alternative evidence to help readers make a more balanced assessment. Jack's conclusions, apart from the very small sample on which they are based, rest on an assumption which every experienced trainer should question. He makes no distinction between knowledge and skill, saying "Knowledge and skill were considered synonymous" and measures the results of the coaching by using a knowledge test

which, he assumes, will also reflect skill level. This is a dangerous misconception.

There are three key factors which help a trainer decide whether to use on- or off-the-job methods. They are:

1. Knowledge versus skills objectives.
2. Need for reinforcement.
3. Learning overload.

Let's consider each in turn.

## Knowledge Versus Skills

A central idea in training for the last 20 years has been that knowledge and skills are different and need different training methods. Reading a book about how to swim may give knowledge but it's poor insurance for the unfortunate non-swimmer required to demonstrate skills when the boat sinks. Conversely, many people have skills without being able to verbalize knowledge. Some of the finest and most skilled people-managers I've met couldn't quote a single human relations guru if their lives depended on it. Knowledge and skill are fundamentally different.

How does this apply to coaching

versus off-the-job methods? Just this — Knowledge can be taught in the classroom effectively and relatively inexpensive. No wonder Jack Kondrasuk concludes that classroom training is effective. He has measured only changes in knowledge.

Let's contrast this with skills. To simulate a skill in the classroom, the learner must perform using role plays or similar methods. Such simulations have two major disadvantages:

- They are seen as artificial, particularly by experienced or older learners.
- There is insufficient time in the average program to allow the repeated practice necessary for acquiring a skill.

Because of this, many larger and more sophisticated organizations are now moving their skills training out of the classroom into the job where the situation is realistic and the time scale allows repeated practice over an extended period. As an indication of this trend, five of our major clients, all in the Fortune Top 100 corporations, have moved an increasing proportion of their skills development into on-the-job coaching during the last two years.

A pattern for the future is likely to be knowledge in the classroom; skills on the job. Jack's assumption that knowledge and skills are the same thing makes his evidence on coaching questionable. He's shown that it's better to teach knowledge in the classroom. Few advocates of coaching would disagree. What he hasn't shown, because he hasn't measured it, is the effect of coaching on skills. He's like the auto mechanic who complained "I don't see how my brother could teach anyone to drive a car. Why, he doesn't even know how a rear-axle differential works." One more time: possession or lack of knowledge is no measure of skill.

#### Need for Reinforcement

Perhaps the strongest argument for coaching is this. However good your skills training in the classroom, unless it's followed up on the job, most of its effectiveness is

## A new do-it-yourself program to **INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY AND EFFICIENCY**

There's a good chance you won't need outside help or have to make a capital investment to turn your organization's productivity and efficiency levels around. You can do it yourselves. Successfully. With a shared commitment to bringing about change. And a practical, results-oriented training program that will help bring it about.

Introducing "Increasing Productivity and Efficiency," a dynamic new training program from BNA Communications. It's a proven, practical approach to training and motivating towards more output and a happier work force, developed by the super-consultants, Dr. Robert R. Blake and Dr. Jane Srygley Mouton, originators of the famous Grid® Method.

The "Increasing Productivity and Efficiency" program includes three outstanding films that will give your managers and supervisors an opportunity to find out how a fictitious company solved its productivity problems. They'll learn how to learn from experience and profit from mistakes. How to use postmortem and critique techniques. How to work together as a team. How to monitor progress and make adjustments.

Accompanying the films are Participant's Manuals keyed to each presentation, for an in-depth understanding of the concepts presented and an opportunity to apply them on the job.

And the entire program will be tied together for you in the Discussion Leader's Manual, a prime trainer's aid that will help you get the most from the program, and the most from your people. You'll also receive a comprehensive Leader's Guide filled with problems, activities and questions for discussion.

Now, is "Increasing Productivity and Efficiency" free? No. But it is far, far less expensive than a consulting firm. And it gives you the chance to take immediate action to effect change—yourselves.

Mail the coupon today to preview this important new program for 24 hours in your office. The preview fee of \$74 may be applied to rental or license if order is received within 30 days of preview date. Included in the preview package is a complete set of leader's and participants' material which is yours to keep.

---

Send me "Increasing Productivity and Efficiency" in the 16mm film format for a 24-hour preview for only \$74, plus shipping. I understand that I may keep the leader's and participants' materials, and apply the preview charge to license or rental within 30 days.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Organization \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_

Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

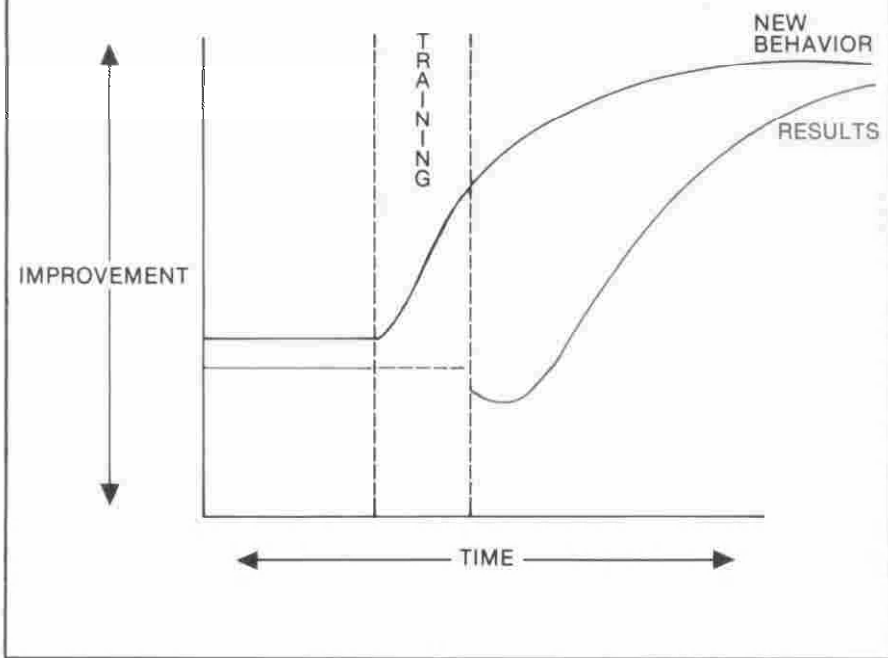


**Get it right from the source.  
BNA Communications Inc.**

A subsidiary of The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc.  
Dept. IPE-666-TD  
9401 Decovery Hall Rd.  
Rockville, Md. 20850  
(301) 948-0540

Circle No. 130 on Reader Service Card

Figure 1  
WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN WITH A NEW SKILL

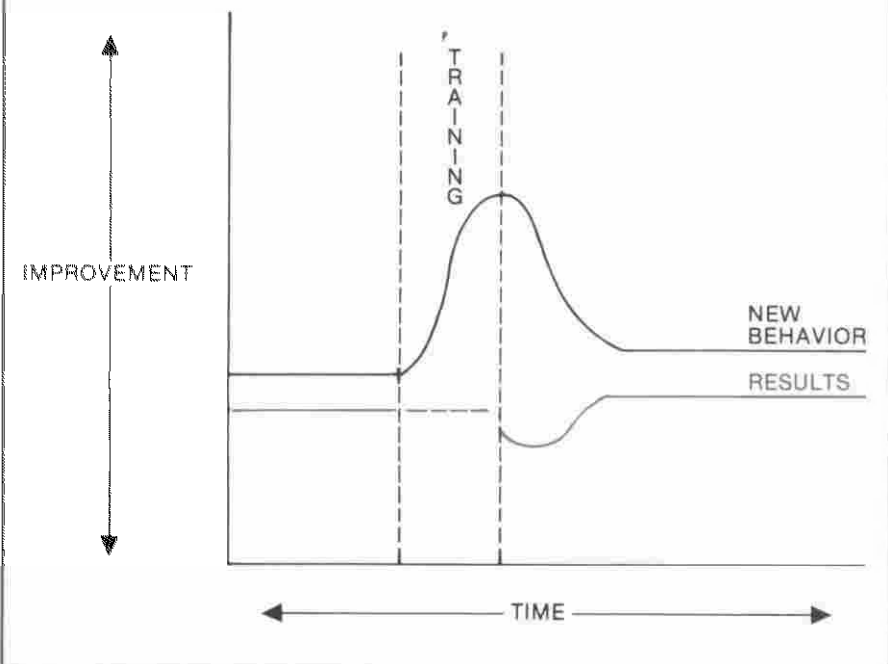


lost. The Xerox Corporation carried out several studies, one of which showed that in the absence of follow-up coaching 87 per cent of the skills change brought about by the program was lost. That's 87 cents in the skills dollar. Knowledge training, on the other hand,

generally shows a much smaller loss

The reason for this painful finding lies in the nature of a skill. By definition, a new skill feels awkward and uncomfortable. It doesn't bring instant results. Think of any skill you've tried to

Figure 2  
WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS TO A NEW SKILL WITHOUT COACHING



change, such as your golf swing, your presentation style, or your methods of handling your children. Does the change bring instant success? Almost certainly not.

In learning most skills we go through an awkward period, illustrated in Figure 1, where the skill doesn't feel natural and isn't bringing results. This period, sometimes called the "results dip," sometimes called "incorporation lag," is a bad time for most people. However, those who persevere gain the expected reward as Figure 1 also shows.

If the learner continues with the new behavior, the skill feels more and more natural and begins to result in better performance.

#### Now the Bad News

What's this got to do with coaching? Just that coaching is the only way to keep a new skill reinforced and encouraged during the dismal period of the results dip. Without coaching, very few people can maintain a newly acquired skill. Let me take a personal example. I play a small musical instrument called a garkleinfotlein. It became extinct in the 17th Century because it's difficult to play and it sounds dreadful. My teacher says "Neil, you lift your fingers up too high. I want you to keep your fingers as low as possible." My teacher is suggesting I try to change a skill. I dutifully lower my fingers and do you think it sounds better? Not on your life. I'm in the results dip. The new behavior feels awkward and doesn't bring results. If I continue to be coached by my teacher, if I keep trying to lower my fingers, in the end my skills will improve, will feel good and even sound acceptable to the listeners. To be honest, I haven't had a music lesson in months and, because it sounds so much worse when I do the right thing, I've abandoned the new skill and gone back to the comfortable old way. I'm like the learner in Figure 2.

When I'm in the results dip, I abandon the new skill. Particularly in sales training our evaluation studies have shown that classroom methods are almost useless for





selecting the best method to train our management personnel." His study, although it doesn't use bottom-line measures, suggests that the end results of coaching might be disappointing. Can I produce evidence to the contrary? I'm grateful to Xerox Corp. for permission to quote from a study carried out in their Newcastle branch on the effectiveness of coaching.

Newcastle branch, with 35 salespeople, was a poor performing unit and had been so for several years. Conventional classroom training had not improved results so Xerox management decided to implement a coaching program. A program was designed where managers in the branch were taught methods for analyzing selling skills and systematically coaching their salespeople. As the results demonstrate, the two-month on-the-job coaching program greatly improved productivity. The branch, which had been trailing at 16th out of 17 in productivity ratings, moved to top place. Even more significant,

**Figure 3.**  
**XEROX NEWCASTLE BRANCH**

	POSITION IN REGION (OF 17 BRANCHES)	CALLS NEEDED TO ACHIEVE EACH ORDER
<b>AVERAGE LEVEL FOR 6-MONTH PRECOACHING PERIOD</b>	16th	48:1
<b>MONTH 1 OF ON-THE-JOB COACHING</b>	13th	32:1
<b>MONTH 2 OF ON-THE-JOB COACHING</b>	3rd	26:1
<b>AVERAGE LEVEL FOR 6-MONTH PERIOD AFTER COACHING</b>	1st	24:1

from needing 48 calls on customers for every once that an order was achieved the branch moved to taking an order from every 24 calls. This increase was one of quality and skill, not just more business from making more calls.

Naturally, every good trainer

should be skeptical about evidence like this. Lots of factors make up branch performance. Can we *prove* that it was just coaching which brought this result? Of course not. The branch improved by 16 places, but an independent study commissioned by Xerox Corp. showed that at least five of those places could be accounted for by non-training factors. Yet Xerox was convinced enough to contribute substantially to the \$750 thousand research program into effective coaching techniques which we developed from this pilot, and today many major corporations are putting a large slice of their training budget into on-the-job coaching.

So, to those two trainers in the L.A. airport, here's my message: Don't draw hasty conclusions that coaching doesn't work. It may be your only way to build an effective skills program, especially in difficult skills areas like selling.

Neil Rackham is the founder and director of Huthwaite Research Group. He is adviser on training and performance development to several large multinational corporations and has worked in over 20 countries on a wide range of consultancy activities. He has written several books including "Evaluation of Management Training" (1970); "Developing Interactive Skills" (1971); and "Behavior Analysis in Training" (1977). He has also authored over 50 technical papers and articles. His works have been translated into 13 languages.

## Product Managers aren't born! They're developed.

A Cresheim study indicates that the product manager and the team (sales, marketing, manufacturing, research, and finance) need an agreed method for (1) developing a good product plan; (2) developing support for the plan; and (3) operating as a team. Our highly regarded *Effective Product Management* workshop was the response to this need.

Most workshops are run in-house for groups of 12 to 16 in the U.S. and abroad. A few mixed-company sessions are scheduled:

December 3-5, 1979—Phila. • February 11-13, 1980—St. Louis

Contact Jim Barrett for more details and a complimentary copy of our study "Why Product Managers Fail."

### Cresheim Company

Management Consulting, Training & Research  
1408 E. Mermaid Lane, Philadelphia, PA 19118  
(215) 836-1400 Cable: CRESHEIM