

# FUNDAMENTALS

## The Course Isn't the Finish Line

Keep them learning long after the training ends.

By Calhoun Wick

*This is the first of a two-part series on follow-through management.*

We've all experienced the frustration: An organization invests significant resources into a training course, and participants clear their calendars to attend. They're inspired by what they learn and promise to put the new concepts to use. But when they return to their jobs, the crunch of routine and pent-up demands wash away any hope of applying the new ideas.

Workforce learning is critical to maintaining a competitive edge. But what's the return-on-investment if little of that learning is used?

Patricia Encinas, agency education consultant for the Chubb Group of Insurance Companies, relates a common experience. "Educational consultants put their hearts and souls into crafting fabulous programs. But participants [leave and] we're left to wonder if anyone is using what we taught them."

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The solution to the problem is simple: follow-through management. Planning, managing, and supporting follow-through accelerates the transfer of learning into actions that produce results. “Our philosophy is that training shouldn’t be an event. It must be a process that goes beyond the classroom,” says Elizabeth McDaid, Chubb’s agency education manager. “Follow-through management is...perfect...for creating a network of people that we can repeatedly ‘touch’ long after the course ends.”

To be effective, learning can’t be confined to the course. “The course is just a mechanism. [People should] take what they’ve learned and start the real work when they get back to the office,” observes Elizabeth Mannix, professor of management and organizations and director of the Center for Leadership at Cornell University. Real learning and change happen when students begin to think of a course as the center of the learning process. What happens before and after a course determines whether any of the learning is applied.

Follow-through management requires a new way of thinking. Prior to using it, Mannix focused more on skills and how participants understood the concepts. “Now we are keeping them focused on forward thinking and how the learning will be applied to their real work,” she says.

Similarly, Van Potter, senior learning consultant at Fidelity Investments, sees the benefit of planning and structuring follow-through. “In my experience, if you want to improve business results by changing behavior, you first have to change thinking. Learning anything new takes repetitive practice and support. Follow-through management provides us with a structure, a framework for that practice and support.”

By implementing a few simple steps before and during a course, you can prepare learners for the follow-through

process and significantly increase the application of learning to work. Here’s how.

## Before the starting line

Managing follow-through means changing both course design and preparation.

**Communicate desired outcomes.** Business leaders must articulate the results they want a course to achieve. No course can make a difference without clearly defined outcomes, so leaders and trainers must have a common vision of what the course will deliver.

“Even before [they arrive] for a one-week course, we have the participants set two types of goals: one personal leadership and one business. We want to give them the mindset of goals,” says Mannix.

**Secure leader sponsorship.** An organization’s leaders must communicate that the material is important and it’s expected to be applied. If managers are invested in the training, participants will be, too. Leaders underestimate how their active sponsorship accelerates learning, and how their indifference undermines it.

Federated Department Stores enlisted the sponsorship of its business leaders in its Leadership Choice program, which involves some of its top 1000 newly promoted executives. “We provided an overview of the follow-through process to division training directors, and then we designed an overview [that was given] to all the regional vice presidents at their annual leadership conference,” reports Susan Sullivan Hays, Federated’s manager of training and development. “We also [called supervisors] who had direct reports in the program so that they’d know what their managers would experience, and what their own role would be in the follow-through period.”

## On the course

To take learning to the next level, participants need to learn how to set accountable development goals and follow through on the concepts learned during the course.

**Focus on goal setting.** Many capable people have difficulty creating specific, measurable goals. Spend time during the course to ensure participants can translate what they learn into goals that will improve their work. Schedule time for participants to write, discuss, and receive feedback on the quality and clarity of their goals. Those goals will be the foundation of the follow-through phase.

“The greatest impact managed follow-through has had is helping participants set concrete, realistic, and achievable goals,” McDaid observes. “And the goals are reinforced [daily] so that they become part of the way a person works.”

**Teach follow-through as a skill.** Because many participants report that they apply little of what they learn, courses are the place to teach follow-through. A structured follow-through process—whether it’s weeks, months, or years—begins as soon as a course ends. Orient students to the elements of the follow-through process that they’ll be expected to implement.

“The first evening, we presented an overview of follow-through...clarified its importance, and set expectations,” says Hays. “We then reinforced its importance during the class, always linking it to individual and organizational goals.”

At Cornell, trainers try to prevent students from returning to their usual habits. “When people return from a course, they’re different but the rest of their colleagues are working in the same old way,” explains Mannix. “So we spend time discussing how [students can] start accomplishing their goals, and how to get peers, supervisors, and [assistants] involved in what they learned.”

**Set high expectations.** From the beginning, make sure participants understand how follow-through will help them achieve their goals. That makes the time and energy they invest more rewarding.

Chubb takes a personal approach to its follow-through management. “Near the end of the course, participants meet individually with an executive development coach to try to integrate, prioritize, and strategize how to begin implementing the goals,” says Mannix. “They can’t possibly do everything at once and be successful, so we try to link their organizational and leadership goals, leveraging them so that they’re more achievable.”

Once the groundwork for follow-through has been laid before and during a course, communication among the participants, their managers, and trainers can be established for the post-course period. Over time, everyone involved will see the impact of the learning as it’s applied and results are delivered. Fidelity’s investment in follow-through management has been a “silver bullet,” according to Potter, by “structuring a way for learners to come together, engage each other, and learn.”

Next month’s conclusion will feature an in-depth look at the post-course follow-through process and its benefits for students, training and development professionals, and their programs.

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