

# What's the Takeaway?

*Harvard's Advanced Management Program offers some strategies for bridging the gap between the island of the classroom and the mainland of the workplace.*

**W**hen the 1989 spring session at Harvard Business School's Advanced Management Program came to a close one Friday, one of the participants approached a faculty member and asked, "What's the takeaway?" In other words, how would what she had learned in the program in the past weeks help her back on the job Monday morning?

How to bridge the knowledge gap between the island of the classroom and the mainland of the workplace is not a new problem for training professionals. New realities, however, require training specialists to develop methods and tools that facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills from learning experiences to on-the-job applications. Increased competition, globalization, more focus on customer satisfaction, a more diversified workforce, and more emphasis on quality dictate that the "takeaway" justify the training dollar.

Universities and organizations are addressing this issue in different ways. University-based programs are external. They educate managers from different companies; the objectives may

**By George P. Hollenbeck  
and Cynthia A. Ingols**

vary. Corporate programs are internal. They educate managers from the same company; organizational change is a clear-cut objective.

## **University-based executive education**

Several examples from Harvard's program illustrate some university-based methods for transferring learning from educational experiences to job situations.

One hundred senior executives from organizations around the world attended last summer's session of Harvard's International Senior Management Program. During the middle of the program, an experiment was introduced. A half dozen of the executives were asked to begin keeping a diary. They were requested to record what they learned each day, how they learned it, and how the learning applied "back home."

The experiment turned out to be valuable, both for the participants and for the sponsors. One significant finding was that everyone learned something different each day, although they were all in the same classroom. Also, the participants said that the process of keeping a diary contributed greatly to their learning.

In the fall 1989 AMP session, two participants developed similar methods for transferring knowledge. John, the general manager of a large corporation, came to the AMP already intent on keeping a diary of sorts. He said he knew from past experience that unless he "did something," three months after a program he'd remem-

ber a few things and six months later all he'd be left with would be a "warm, fuzzy feeling."

Each day John summarized the lessons with six bullets, which he transmitted every evening on his portable computer to the computer back in his office. The next morning, his summaries were distributed to his boss and to upper management. John found it difficult to summarize three cases and fifteen hours' work into only six bullets, and was soon writing three-to-five-page daily synopses. His boss found these reports so interesting he began distributing them to the company's executive committee.

When John finished the program he commented, "I started doing this to keep people in my organization informed, but it turned out that writing those summaries was of enormous benefit to me. Going through a program like this shouldn't be like taking a bus ride through Vermont to look at the fall foliage." John had found a way to bridge the gap.

Also attending the fall session was an executive who was changing jobs. He organized a loose-leaf folder into sections corresponding to strategies, based on Jack Gabarro's model, for taking charge in a new management position: taking hold, immersing, reshaping, consolidating, and refining. Over the next three months, when he learned about a particular aspect of leadership he wrote a note to himself in the notebook. At the close of the session, the notebook—an inch and a half thick—was something he could "take away."

Another university program, Managing Change, requires teams of executives to arrive at the start of the program with a "live" change problem. During the course of the next

**Hollenbeck** is vice-president of organization development at FRM Corporation, 82 Devonshire Street, Boston, MA 02109. **Ingols** is manager of research at Harvard Business School.

*The Advanced Management Program at the Harvard Business School, described in this article, is held each spring and fall with 160 executives from all over the world. The program, which runs for three months, uses the case-study method and is designed to prepare executives for corporate-level executive management jobs.*

two weeks, theory and practice are mixed. Mornings are devoted to classes and afternoons to working on the "back-home" problem. The program culminates with a detailed plan for action to implement, beginning "Day One" when the team members return to their jobs.

Follow-ups suggest that people who have been through programs like the ones described become more strategic thinkers and develop much broader perspectives. They learn to execute within organizations, they have a greater sense of self-efficacy, and they gain a new appreciation for the leadership role.

Harvard's AMP experience and research supports the idea that the drive for change often begins at the top, generally when events in the external environment demonstrate that old ways of doing business are no longer profitable.

For example, when CEO David Kearns decided the corporate culture at Xerox had to change for the company to become more competitive, he began a training program that started, not elsewhere in the organization, but in his own office. As a result, everyone at Xerox learned to "speak the same language." The upshot was that Xerox employees—and there are thousands—were able to focus their energies as a group. There were also some practical effects such as expediting the flow of work in meetings.

Training and organizational development specialists everywhere have become much more knowledgeable about how changes occur in organizations and the role training can play. This has been especially true in the days since the sensitivity training T-Groups of the 1960s first alerted them to the problem of a knowledge transfer gap.

Although the use of sensitivity training to invoke organizational change was popular for a time, participants and sponsors of T-Group programs began to question its effectiveness when they saw two patterns emerge.

■ In one, a lone, "changed" individual returned to an unchanged organizational milieu.

■ In the other pattern, the pressure of daily events in the old culture caused the "changed" individual to revert to the old ways of doing business.

It became clear that developing an

isolated individual, or even small groups of employees, had little impact on overall organizational effectiveness.

T-Groups no longer flourish, but

### **Five Best-Practice Principles for Transferring Training**

■ **Doing is a key part of learning.** This approach assures that managers will be able to "walk the talk." Techniques require participants to demonstrate that they have synthesized the materials presented in the classroom. Learners must be active.

■ **Past experience is the foundation for development.** A person's past experience can be the starting point for change. The new learning interweaves with the old, making the application of the new a seamless transition.

■ **The classroom can become an extension of the job.** The maxim that 80 percent of development takes place on the job breaks down; the training/job overlap is so pervasive that the distinction becomes artificial. Transfer of training, in this instance, can become a two-way street.

■ **Critical reflection provides a road map for the future.** The road map that evolves during development is based on integrating new data, through a reflective process, into what is already known and has already been experienced. Through this process, new experience is viewed in a new way, old data appear in a new light, and new guidelines for action emerge.

■ **Other managers are a key to the process.** Management, unlike math and science, has few absolutes. The principles of social learning—models, vicarious experience, trial and error, and feedback from others—form an important basis for group learning. Learning with and from others is not only motivational, but also very efficient. Learning to discern what works best—as well as when, where, and how—often comes from relating the experiences of others to those of our own.

the problem they revealed is still around: How do we bridge the gap from the classroom to the job?

One way is for in-house training programs to become tools for organizational change and individual development—particularly with a visionary leader to lay the framework. Such a leader can ignite the energies of the people in an organization by proposing new goals and new ways of achieving them. When isolated individuals are no longer expected to change an organization, training can focus on a critical mass.

### **Internal organizational approaches**

Many corporations are developing internal techniques for closing the gap by structuring their training programs to ensure long-term impact. In 1988, Ford instituted a program for its 2,500 middle managers, titled "Leadership Executive Education and Development." Ford's emphasis on application in this ongoing program is so strong that it is referred to as "organization intervention" rather than training or education.

In groups of 25, Ford's managers attend a five-day session that ends with making plans for making an impact on the organization. The initial session is followed seven months later with a three-day program to evaluate progress and re-plan.

Another example of an internal corporate approach comes from Marks and Spencer, a leading retailer in the United Kingdom. Faced with developing a training program for middle managers, Marks and Spencer assembled a task force from its pool of managers. The company asked the managers to diagnose their own training needs and produce a program for use with all middle managers.

Such internal concepts combine low cost, high involvement, and staff support for line managers in meeting their objectives. It is difficult to imagine such a program failing.

University-based executive education programs like the one at Harvard and internal organizational programs like the ones at Xerox and Ford have produced some valuable lessons for bridging the knowledge gap—not new theory but several sound principles of practice for adult learning and transfer of training. ■