

Are Your Trainees Willing?

People can be trained to the hilt, but if they're not willing to achieve performance goals, the training has been wasted. Recognizing an unwillingness to achieve, and getting at the beliefs that are responsible, may be so simple that we've overlooked them.

By MARTHA B. SPICE and SUSAN KOPPERL

Mary has said for years how much she wants to lose weight. She knows what to do and how to do it. The technology for weight loss is, after all, fairly simple. She has suffered the consequences of her excess poundage in both her professional and personal life. Yet she's still carrying those extra 50 pounds and saying how much she wants to lose it. Why?

We train people how to perform, we train them when to perform, we give

knowledge and skill comes the willingness to perform with excellence. Again and again we're proven wrong.

Trainers try to solve the problem through planning. "No one leaves class without an action plan," they say self-righteously. One day we happened to ask how many participants were planning to do every item on their carefully constructed plans. Not a hand rose. It was then that we realized something was missing. We had never asked, "Are you willing to do it?" and "If not, why not?"

Many trained employees are not producing the results organizations desire. Are we spending so much energy and resources on sophisticated skills training that we have overlooked the importance of a willing attitude? Certainly, the question "do you know how to" is different from "are you willing to"—change, perform with excellence, learn, give up control, take control, risk, do something different and uncomfortable. We need to ask the questions directly and listen to the answers we get.

People are smart. They do what they perceive to be in their best interest. They act in accordance with the truth as they see it. If employees, managers or even trainers are not doing what is expected of them even though it is within their capability, then at some level they simply don't want to do it. They don't think it's in their best interest. They are unwilling.

Our increasing acceptance of these ideas over the last few years has prompted us to redefine our roles as trainers and to look with a fresh perspective at the relative emphasis placed on three determinants of effective performance: appropriate knowledge, skill and

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them the tools they need, we provide incentives . . . and they still don't do their jobs. Why?

Perhaps the answer in both cases is the same. Mary, and many of our trainees, have not faced up to the fact that they really don't want to achieve some things. They must own up to that unwillingness and find out why they actually don't want to achieve performance goals that are within reach.

Human resource professionals commonly ask two questions. Do you know what to do? And do you know when and how to do it? If the answers are no, we train. We have assumed that along with

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attitude. Our conclusion is that willingness, or lack of it, is a far more important factor in performance than we have previously acknowledged. The challenge is to integrate the teaching of required skills with activities that help people acknowledge the truth as they see it, assess their level of willingness to perform the skill and make appropriate choices for action.

For example, when two experienced supervisors were asked why they were unwilling to use the time management and delegation skills they had learned, they responded:

- It's easier to do it myself than explain it to others.
- My subordinates aren't experienced enough to do it the way I want.
- I'm physically separated from my staff. It's hard to communicate.
- I always have too much to do.
- There are too many meetings. I have no control.
- I guess I'm just a procrastinator.

Rather than accepting these responses, the questioner continued to probe and asked, "Why are you unwilling to use the time management and delegation techniques to ease your workload and be more effective on the job?" This time they responded:

- Because I fear conflict with my subordinate over getting the job done right.
- Because I'm uncomfortable and nervous when subordinates mess up the deadlines I have with my own boss.
- I'd rather work on my C-priority tasks, which give me a sense of daily accomplishment, than sweat over those tedious, never-ending A-priority jobs.
- When things pile up, I feel important. People count on me to get things done in a crisis.

These answers were closer to the real willingness issues. Interestingly enough, the participants were not reluctant to share these very personal objections.

Once we uncover the truth, how do we handle it? Expressions of fear and admissions of powerlessness are not reasoned away easily. When we do uncover the truth about our unwillingness, we are facing the fact that in our minds, the perceived negative consequences of performing the learned behaviors can far outweigh the benefits.

We all hold deep-seated beliefs about what is safe for us to do. These beliefs are part of our self-image, the picture we



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have in our minds of what we can and can't do in given situations. These images are at the core of our behavior both on and off the job.

Fortunately, educators are starting to accept the paradigm that the self-image is a prime generator of performance. Most of us find it easy to accept the evidence in the fields of health, sales and sports, evidence that positive and willing thoughts create the actions that deliver positive results. The opposite is true by implication. If our results are below par, we can and should look for a negative or unwilling thought as a possible cause.

Given the importance of self-image to performance, we can be thankful it is not engraved in stone. A new picture can be installed, a picture congruent with our desires, which supports effective and fearless performance of duties. Here's where trainers have a special opportunity to help modify these all-controlling im-

ages, by reselecting some of the thoughts and pictures that compose them. We need to develop expertise with the powerful techniques of visualization and affirmation, the basic tools for generating new, positive self-images.

The power of this technique was exhibited in a recent basic management class when one woman sought her own truth. Jill, a historian in a regional office, was angry with a colleague who refused to do his share of work, leaving her with the overload. When asked why she was unwilling to have it any different, she was offended at the implication of the question, but wrote down her thoughts.

"The reasons my work situation is not the way I want it is:

- My colleague is irresponsible.
- My boss doesn't know what is going on.
- If he did know, he wouldn't do anything.

- The field calls *me* all the time, anyway.
- I take on the work because I don't want to let them down and it makes me feel important.
- I'm not willing to confront my colleague.
- It's easier to just live with it.
- I'm afraid. I don't know how to handle changing the situation without attracting the anger of my colleague."

First, in the privacy of her own mind and heart, and later to all her classmates, Jill admitted her surprise over the last three items—her truth, previously hidden from her consciousness. No longer denying her personal responsibility for the situation, her attitude of "show me how to deal with this impossible situation, teacher" vanished and she was willing to do something different. Her inaction had been based on her perception that the consequences of changing would be too uncomfortable and therefore would not be in her best interest.

A safe environment allowed Jill to tell the truth about her fears in front of all her classmates. Now they could help her explore some options: to confront the situation and change it, to accept it or to leave it. Once she made the decision to change, she formulated new, positive statements to begin acquiring a powerful image that will allow her to take constructive actions without fear.

"To work towards a solution:

- I accept that I have total responsibility for all my situations.
- I will tactfully propose in staff meetings that we review workload, deadlines and procedures. It's easy for me to make good, positive suggestions.
- It's o.k. with me, that it's not o.k. with my colleague, that I want to propose some changes with which I'd like both of us to cooperate.
- The more I let go of my 'super-responsibility,' the more things work." (This is one of the most powerful and effective management improvement statements around, particularly for women).

Thought selection, the development and use of affirmations, has been used most frequently and successfully by salespeople, whose self-image must withstand daily rejection. If we are totally honest with ourselves, we, too, will admit that we have used this mental programming tool all our lives.

Some of us, however, have used it less systematically and consciously than others, and we have talked ourselves into repeated fears and failures long after

the originating experience has passed. It's time professional trainers looked at this technique anew and acknowledged its effectiveness as a tool for improving trainees' chances for success.

The technique of thought selection is deceptively simple. Jill had a hard time believing those new statements. While they support powerful new results, they are not what she believes right now. Try talking yourself into the idea that something is easy when you believe it's hard. And try persuading yourself that you know something when you don't at all. Yet, if you can, you'll be pleased you did.

In spite of all the evidence that this technique is effective, participants sometimes get offended and refuse to tell themselves these seemingly blatant lies about themselves. But they must in order to be successful. Thoughts drive actions much faster than actions drive thoughts.

The HRD challenge

What are we proposing for members of the human resource professions? First, take the issue of willingness seriously for yourself. Are you willing to be effective? Check your degree of willingness against your level of results:

- Ask yourself what results you want in your life, your career and your current job.
- Freely explore, in private, with a paper and pencil. Finish the following sentence 10 or 20 times. Take what comes without censorship. *The reason I don't do (don't have or am not) my desired result is _____*
- Look at your list of self-imposed limitations, assumptions and previously unexamined thoughts about your situation. Change them so that the assumptions support how you want to be, whether or not you believe it right now.
- Install the new idea by repeating it daily, even though you may experience it as untrue for a while.

Second, learn the skills required to conduct willingness checks for participants in all your programs. Ask yourself:

- How can I better create a safe environment for people to tell the truth?
- How can I help people probe beyond convenient excuses to the core of the issue?
- How can I better ascertain the faulty assumptions upon which an individual's poor performance and unwillingness are based?

Third, become an expert in the thinking and picturing technologies of affirma-

tion and visualization. They are widely used and written about, and they have been treated only cursorily here. Equip yourself to help others reselect the critical relevant thoughts and assumptions that will support a new experience of excellence.

Fourth, maximize the impact of your training programs by providing people with tools, like the willingness checks described earlier, that will promote their desire to use the skills you teach them. We need systematically to develop tools that will allow employees to assess their willingness and redirect their unwillingness so that the energy of their minds and spirits can fully support their contribution to the organization.

Today, many managers are asking, "How do we become excellent?" One of the most powerful findings of the best seller *In Search of Excellence* is the attention excellent companies paid to their people's ideas. They asked employees for their ideas, and they listened to them. They asked how things might go right and why things were going wrong. Not only did they listen to the answers, they did something useful with the information.

Trainers, too, can assist in the march toward excellence. Not only do managers need to ask different questions of their employees and listen to the answers, employees need to learn a new way of listening to their own internal wisdom. Trainers must acknowledge that every employee has the answer to his or her productivity problem, if we will but ask.

Help build the beliefs that support high performance and organizational goals. Learn more, and start using the technology that promotes a willingness to be excellent. It's a simple, elegant and workable technology. It's so simple, its power and potential have been overlooked.

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