

BEFORE TRAINING TAKES PLACE, WE MUST STRIVE
TO CREATE CLEAR AND POSITIVE EXPECTATIONS,
BOTH FOR THE POTENTIAL TRAINEE AND THE MANAGER.

SOLVING THE TRANSFER OF TRAINING PROBLEMS

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The role of training in the 1980s is predicted to expand sharply, bringing with it both problems and opportunities. Professional trainers must increasingly be concerned with creating effective programs and substantiating their values. More sophisticated evaluative strategies will be used as organizations seek useful evidence regarding the effectiveness of training. Such evaluations can be expected to focus on outcomes that are observable and measurable in on-the-job behavior.

It is our contention that many current training programs are not optimally effective because their designers and presenters fail to consider adequately the need to facilitate transfer of training to the work environment. In other words, a "good" program — one that produces change within the training context itself — is still inadequate if it fails to induce significant new behavior on the job. To use a medical analogy, "the operation was a success, but the patient died." In

the remainder of this article, we will review the classical approaches to solving the transfer problem, and then challenge trainers to consider a series of practical approaches to obtain a better payoff from their efforts.

Traditional Methods. Two classical approaches have been advocated in the training literature to accomplish transfer to the job. The first is called *identical elements*. In this approach trainees are taught, in the training context, all the important dimensions of their job assignment. Motor skills and technical skills lend themselves well to this type of approach. In other words, a machine tool operator who is properly trained will almost certainly transfer the instructed skills because proper operation of similar machinery is required in his/her everyday work performance. In the case of other conceptual or administrative skills, which are less objectively circumscribed (i.e., time management, management by objectives, etc.) or those which pertain to the affective domain (i.e., interpersonal skills), implementation on-the-job is less

likely unless some additional element is provided by the training.

Because "old habits die hard," and because those skills are not always perceived as essential to job performance, there is a powerful tendency to set them aside for an "appropriate" moment. It is in these areas, particularly, that the use of certain transfer techniques may have the most profound impact.

A second major approach traditionally followed was that of transfer through *principles*. Here trainers focused on the development and presentation of general guidelines and principles that might be appropriate to all situations, without regard to the job environment. Trainees were then expected to return to their jobs and identify opportunities for applications, and adapt the principle to the task. Management skills, as an example, are often taught as generic principles — and the trainee seems to learn them in the classroom. Unfortunately, implementation of these principles is much more difficult. Thus, although the trainee may be successful in study or role

play sessions, change on-the-job may not take place.

In one recent training session, we discovered another problem in teaching "principles" as the only transfer mechanism. During our small group activities on interpersonal skills, we used examples from our own management experiences to illustrate the universality of the skills. After the session was over, evaluations were collected. A large percentage of the participants said, "Your examples were not appropriate for my situation." This audience resisted the notion that other management challenges could be similar to their own. By rejecting the examples, they may have rejected the principles and skills. As a result, we believe it unlikely that the training had measurable on-the-job impact.

We do not imply that the use of "principles," or the identification of "similarities" between the training examples and the job performance of the trainee have no value. Indeed they do. However, we do not feel these techniques are enough. The additional processes we recommend can be categorized into three time frames: steps taken before, during, and after the training. The three phases parallel the three essential elements of behavior modeling: 1) create positive expectations; 2) create performance opportunities, with ample feedback; and 3) create a mechanism to reinforce positive behavior. We recognize that trainers often have little direct control over the work environment. We have, therefore, outlined a variety of activities which involve, where possible, the participant's supervisor so that the outcome is a responsibility shared with trainers by line management. Successful transfer technology requires integration of *all* elements which could impact the participants' performance — in other words, a holistic approach.

Before the Training

A fair assumption is that most trainees have one or more questions in their minds as the date of a program approaches. "What will they try to accomplish? What's in it for me? Does my boss endorse it? How will I be involved?" Conse-

quently, a professional trainer can capitalize on these concerns by applying any of the following concepts.

Advance Letter. The first step in the holistic approach is to inform the participant of the nature of the training and its intended on-the-job benefits.

This is generally done through a detailed statement of objectives, the process to be used, expectations of participants, and examples of potential skill applications. This method builds upon an old cliché that states "if you tell your trainees what your objectives are, half your work is already done."

Involvement of Superior. The previous step alone does not adequately address the creation of positive expectations, however. As an added aid to this end, we suggest an advance letter to the trainee's supervisor, stressing the expected outcome of the training and suggesting the manager's active involvement in the "before and after" training process. In fact, if the supervisor's involvement can be initiated at this point in time, the benefits are two-fold. Not only does the trainee see evidence of strong advance support for the development of new skills, but the supervisor is more apt to follow-up the training in a supportive way.

This advance letter technique was used in a seminar that a staff member of ours recently attended. We received an advance summary of the seminar objectives, which included a brief description of the methodology to be used in the sessions. Additionally, the seminar leaders asked that the manager review and discuss the primary strengths and weaknesses of the participant relative to the skill areas to be taught in the seminar. As a result of this assignment, we had a pretraining conference with the staff member and discussed our response to the questionnaire. The staff member was better prepared for the training sessions, our mutual expectations from the seminar were clarified, and we had established the basis for a later developmental review. Needless to say, we also had a substantial

interest in the outcomes of the training intervention.

Prescribed Tasks. Either of the first two approaches mentioned may be relatively passive for the participant. A third method that immediately involves the trainee and begins to elicit excitement as well as better define the trainee's role is to assign a task prior to the training session. Advance readings could be provided, or a case analysis assigned. Alternatively, you could ask the participant to identify a work problem on which he/she could focus the use of the skills during the training, and which could then serve as a basis for evaluating the change in the participant's behavior upon return to the work environment. You could select some other activity of your own choosing, such as sending the participant various self-analysis materials in advance. Regardless of which specific approach that you select, the essential ele-

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ments of this step are: (1) clearly communicate the objectives of the training; (2) increase the manager's and trainee's stake in the outcome of the training; (3) establish a pattern for training-related communication between the manager and the trainee; and (4) stress the necessity for involvement and activity at the outset.

During the Training

Because advance activities cannot always be closely controlled by the trainer, the process of insuring transfer of training cannot end there. Aside from using all the elements of good training design in your program — clearly emphasizing

the benefits of new behavior, training in universal principles, and customizing activities to mirror actual job situations — additional steps must be taken during the session to anticipate and overcome transfer problems. In this section we will discuss contracts, problem anticipation discussions, and support groups.

Training Contracts. Many trainers use some type of contract system to focus trainee attention on future skill implementation. This usually heightens participant commitment to transfer. The contract may be formal: written to the boss or trainer; or it may be an informal

“contract with oneself.”

To increase the likelihood of implementation, the participant should specify in the contract not only the new behavior, but also the resulting benefits to him/her for utilizing the new behaviors. The contract should also specify the measurement standard and time period for judging progress. Evaluation will be impossible for the participant — as well as the manager — if such standards are not available. In addition, the actual task to be attempted should be as specific and detailed as possible. “I’m going to be a more supportive supervisor,” does not meet the standards. “I’m going to ask my subordinates for their point of view before resolving a conflict,” is identifiable and more nearly measurable — and, therefore, more likely to be attempted.

In ASTD-sponsored institutes, for example, a contract is used for these purposes (see Figure 1). When completed, one copy is kept by the trainee; one is given to the trainer; and one is kept by ASTD and sent to the trainee as a three-month follow-up and stimulus to action. Because time is allotted in the training session itself for completion of this form, a cognitive connection is made between the newly acquired skills and some specific on-the-job application. We believe that this intellectual exercise assists trainees in focusing their attention on the real world while enthusiasm for the new skills is at its highest point. Since the contract will not be received by the supervising manager, we find that the trainee is more likely to take a few risks, and put real thought into the selection of observable, individual tasks where experimentation may produce early rewards. Since “success breeds success,” this is important to the development of habits, and encourages future skill experimentation.

Problem Anticipation. Contracting can increase the intellectual awareness and commitment of the participant without providing the tools with which actual on-the-job implementation can occur. We recommend that, before the close of

Figure 1.

A CONTRACT WITH MYSELF

In the first column jot down the three or four major topic areas of this institute that most impressed you. Then, in brief form, jot down in the second column one or two main points you learned in each area. Last, identify one or more actions you intend to take under each of the topic areas. Write down your action item in the right hand column.

Be specific. An example might be, “Design and implement a written participant evaluation procedure for each of our training programs within 30 days.”

MAJOR TOPICS	LEARNING POINTS	ACTION ITEM (WHAT AND WHEN)
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

Keep original for yourself.

Put 1st carbon in envelope, seal, address to yourself.

Give 2nd carbon to instructor (optional).

any training session, a discussion should take place in which the trainees discuss the probable obstacles to implementation. This should be a problem-solving session, where participants anticipate real-life issues and develop strategies to deal with them. In this way, the participant recognizes the problem in terms of real obstacles, and is more likely to respond appropriately. The problem-solving session has the added effect of closely connecting the training effort with "the real world," and this is what effective training is all about.

In one of the programs that we regularly conduct, this transfer brainstorming session is one of the last scheduled activities. We encourage the trainees to anticipate the job environment. We identify potential sources of on-the-job support; conditions under which new skills are most likely to become habitual; general mechanisms for self-evaluation. We ask the trainees to compare their real world situation with our ideal description, and then to prepare contingency plans. For each element necessary to support the development of new habits, we ask the trainee to create an alternative element. For example, if "regular progress reviews" are mentioned as an essential support mechanism, we ask "What if these are not available?" The ensuing discussion yields an action plan for each participant, individualized for appropriate circumstances.

Support Groups. As a final step during training, the trainer must recognize the value of subsequent feedback and support to the trainee. Since, in most cases, the trainer cannot follow-up with individual trainees on a regular basis, the participants could be asked to exchange phone numbers or addresses; or they could schedule a subsequent meeting to compare their notes or discuss unforeseen problems; or they may select a "partner" with whom they will correspond. Any of these approaches will constitute a support group. The trainer may take an active role in this by volunteering to create a "chain" newsletter for idea-swapping,

to send periodic information or questionnaires, or may simply facilitate the organizational process, and then withdraw.

Even if the trainee genuinely believes in the value of the trained skills but gets no reinforcement from a manager or peers, it is highly unlikely that performance will continue long enough to become habitual. The support group can fill the "feedback void" until the new behaviors create their own success record. When the new skills are implemented and a success pattern emerges, the need for external reinforcement will diminish, and the support group will become informal.

All three of these techniques (contracts, problem-solving sessions, and support groups) address issues essential to training transfer: (1) the trainee must be intellectually aware of the situations in which new skill use is most appropriate; (2) the training session itself must be related to recognizing

able job issues and tasks; (3) the opportunity must be provided for proactive planning for implementation; and (4) reinforcement must be provided while trainees are still experimenting with new skills.

After the Training

The period after the training session provides the real test of effective transfer. A number of transfer techniques may be used effectively.

Delayed Evaluation. Among the most common reminder techniques is that of followup evaluations, where trainees are asked to assess the impact of the training after a 30-day or three month intervals. The problem with this technique is that too much time elapses between the training and the follow-up. In other words, if we allow time for trial of the skills, and if no practice is actually occurring, our follow-up is reduced to a potentially painful reminder of "failure."

Additional Resources and Activities. Several additional methods

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"For new behaviors to become habitual, reinforcement must be present from the outset."

are available. Early refresher courses may be offered, reviewing the highlights of the main program, or confronting implementation issues that are raised. Additional readings or brief summaries of major points may be distributed as frequent reminders. Second level (advanced) courses on the same topics may be scheduled, with more sophisticated techniques explored. However, each of these methods suffers a bit from the passivity problem mentioned earlier. What is needed is a more immediate tool that encourages experimentation with new skills, and provides feedback to the performer.

Progress Report. For new behaviors to become habitual, reinforcement must ideally be present from the outset. For example, a "progress report" might be sent to the manager or participant, or

both, immediately following the training. This should outline strengths and weaknesses observed in training practice sessions. If a "contract" was developed, some reference to the specific task outlined by the trainee as a potential opportunity for skill use should be made in the report. It may be suggested that this report could serve as the foundation for a manager-trainee dialogue. In addition, the supervisor and trainee should be reminded of the performance standards for progress measurement. The trainee should also be reminded of the support group availability, should no reinforcement be forthcoming from the supervisor. In every case, the trainees should be encouraged to share the results of the training with their manager, either formally or informally. If the manager was involved before training, it is more likely that the manager will ask for a report from the trainee.

Direct Reinforcement. Another technique available to the trainer is the use of incentives. The trainer may establish a contest, in which trainees are eligible for recognition or even some material reward, if they can document incidents of successful performance. The results may then be publicized throughout the support group, or on a broader basis, via some recognition of accomplishment (i.e., a certificate). In this way, successful implementation is rewarded even in the absence of managerial involvement. If such involvement does exist, the incentive technique may be suggested to the manager in the earlier phases, and administered in the on-the-job environment by the manager. The trainee can then see the commitment of management to the training effort and may be motivated to word successful training transfer.

Habits grow from repeated behaviors that are reinforced. The key to this followup phase of training transfer is to establish a supportive environment in which the trainer, manager, or support

group: (1) encourages skill use; (2) gives regular feedback on the trainee's performance; and (3) rewards desired outcomes.

Conclusion

Transfer of training should be a major concern to human resource development professionals. Particularly in today's economy, executives are carefully scrutinizing all employee interventions with an eye toward bottom-line results. Sound programs are only the beginning. The trainer's impact must extend beyond the classroom; it must be integrated with actual on-the-job conditions. We cannot afford to ignore the work climate in the design of our training efforts. A clearly defined system should be initiated which unites the trainer, trainee, and the manager, where possible, in the transfer process.

The steps suggested here will increase the likelihood that skills taught in the classroom will be transferred to the work environment. Before training takes place, we must strive to create clear and positive expectations, both for the potential trainee and the manager. We must facilitate open communication channels between trainees and their superiors. During training, we must use every means to relate the training examples and principles to the work environment. We must make the trainee aware of the obstacles to transfer and provide strategies for overcoming these problems. After the training, we must make every effort to provide application opportunities, as well as a feedback and reinforcement mechanism that supports immediate skill use and rewards desired performance. By integrating these steps into the holistic design of our training programs, we bind the academic to the practical, and substantiate the value of the training function.

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