

The Problem of Transfer Calls for Partnership

By DAVID L. GEORGENSON

How many times have you heard training directors say: "I need to find a way to assure that what I teach in the classroom is effectively used on the job?"

"I would estimate that only 10 percent of content which is presented in the classroom is reflected in behavioral change on the job. With increased demand from my management to demonstrate the effectiveness of training, I've got to find a way to deal with the issue of transfer." The problem of transfer is a critical concern. This is especially true in a tight economy where payback on investment in employee development is essential.

By transfer, I mean the degree to which an individual uses the knowledge and skills learned in the classroom on the job in an effective and continuous manner. Transfer is achieved through the convergence of many factors, such as:

- Program content based on the short- and long-range organizational goals;
- Policies, norms and procedures which support the course content;
- Learners who are highly motivated toward the training;
- Program content based on a thorough task analysis which identified the knowledge and/or skills that distinguish the effective

from the ineffective performer;

- A training program which is designed using sound instructional technology;
- Management which actively supports and promotes the use of training content.

The list goes on with many conditions out of the control of the training department. Even if the training person has significant influence in the organization, dealing with all these factors simultaneously would leave little time for classroom responsibilities. Therefore, one must first address the area that holds the greatest promise for improving the transfer of skills to daily work activities.

Manager support

While many elements influence skill usage, none has as much impact on the trainee as his or her immediate manager. The manager assigns work, provides daily feedback and evaluates results. Most employees work hard to determine exactly what their boss expects and then strive to meet those expectations. This is the law of organizational life since managers control both tangible and intangible employee rewards. This control of rewards gives the manager substantial influence over employees' work behavior, not only affecting what is accomplished but how it is accomplished. For example, Susan attends a company-sponsored course which teaches supervisors how to complete performance ap-

praisal forms and conduct an effective appraisal interview. When she returns to the work station, she encounters the following conditions:

- Susan's manager does not use the same thorough approach taught in the course when appraising her performance;
- Susan is not praised when she effectively uses the techniques taught in the course. In fact, she is criticized for work not completed while she was finishing several appraisal forms which were due at the same time.

This illustrates how an employee can actually be punished for using the skills taught in the course. In this example, it is only natural that she will revert back to her old method of handling appraisals and the training will have been wasted, since the boss did not provide the proper on-the-job support.

As training professionals, what actions or behaviors should we encourage on the part of the trainee's manager? The place to begin is by setting the stage before the employee attends any course. The manager should indicate the importance of the content by showing how it relates to the subordinate's success in achieving his or her work objectives. This legitimizes the subordinate's attendance and demonstrates the manager's support for the course. In the above case, the manager could have shown the relationship between giving specific feedback in an appraisal and continuing to

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motivate an individual to achieve work objectives. An additional item for the precourse meeting between the trainee and his or her manager should be a joint discussion and selection of a work project which could be tied directly to course content. This project then becomes a focal point for discussions before, during and after the course.

The manager, by initiating a project discussion, again demonstrates clearly the importance placed on the course content. If, however, the manager has considerable difficulty selec-

ing self reports or reviewing the results of the work project completed after attending the course. The manager and subordinate should jointly establish acceptable methods of collecting performance data (related to skill usage) at the end of the course. This *joint* decision is critical in order to reduce the threat of negative manager evaluation. To appropriately support skill usage, the manager's behavior must be in a helping, coaching context rather than that of an evaluator. Feedback should be frequent during the early stages of practicing

that all new learners (including the manager) encounter similar frustrations and that the awkwardness will dissipate with continued practice.

Another important factor in transferring skills back to the work station depends on how completely the program content is integrated into organizational policies, norms, forms, etc. This has been an uphill battle for trainers because of the tremendous inertia encountered when changing an organizational procedure or policy. Trainers, however, can and should prepare managers of course participants to integrate course principles and procedures into their work unit. In the case of a problem-solving course, the manager might incorporate course content by:

- Designing forms or work sheets which outline the key steps taught in the course and strongly urge form usage;
- Using the problem-solving steps as part of individual or staff meetings, thus providing a positive model for the subordinate to follow;
- Using the same terminology presented in the course in everyday conversation with subordinates.

Without higher level approval, most managers can easily integrate course content into the daily activities of the work unit. Trainers can greatly enhance the degree to which skills are transferred by working with individual line managers rather than trying to change the policies and procedures of an entire organization.

In summary, skill transfer to the work station can be improved significantly if managers follow these five steps:

- Set the proper stage;
- Jointly identify a work project to be completed during the course;
- Provide proper feedback;
- Be supportive;
- Integrate course procedures into daily work.

Since most managers are not skillful at using these steps, trainers should provide learning experiences which demonstrate

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ting a related work project, he or she should question the value of having the subordinate attend the course. The difficulty may stem from a mismatch between course content and an individual's job responsibilities.

After the course is given, trainers should encourage the trainee's manager to provide feedback to the employee on how well he or she is using the new skills. This should include both positive feedback when a skill is effectively demonstrated and constructive criticism when ineffectively used. The rules of good feedback must be followed: it should be given immediately after the behavior, it should provide specifics rather than generalities and it should offer coaching assistance (showing how to correct behavior).

To provide feedback effectively, the manager must be familiar with the skills taught (perhaps having attended the course) and must have established appropriate methods for collecting performance data on skill usage. These methods might include first hand observation, subor-

inate the skill on the job and become less frequent over time.

By relating the specific feedback to the subordinate's performance objectives, the manager provides a common thread during both the course and the on-the-job application. If, for example, a production supervisor attends a course on problem solving, his or her manager might provide positive feedback linking the effective use of the skills to a reduction in rejects, a key performance dimension for the supervisor. This link provides purpose, direction and legitimacy to the feedback and reinforces the importance of the skills which were taught in the classroom. Trainers must find ways to pass these techniques to managers to assure that skill transfer occurs.

Managers of course participants should also be reminded that initial attempts at skill transfer are awkward, difficult and occasionally lead to failure. Subordinates should not be overly criticized since they need support and encouragement to continue using the skill. Managers can also help by assuring them

their importance as well as give adequate opportunities for practice.

Obtaining involvement

These steps sound simple. The problem is that if applied conscientiously, they require a considerable amount of time.

Managers who are overworked and under pressure to produce may not fully understand that the skills taught in the classroom can help achieve unit goals. The issue becomes one of convincing line managers that they should spend time learning and using the five steps outlined above. This problem of obtaining management involvement is not new; trainers recognize there are no simple strategies that work in all situations.

The core of the solution is realizing that managers are driven by the need to achieve what the organization expects. To accomplish these expectations, they expend energy on those activities that will clearly produce results. Therefore, trainers must seek ways to prove to managers that investing their time in actively reinforcing the skills their subordinates learn in the classroom will have a tangible payoff. The first step is for the trainer to complete a course analysis. Program content should be linked directly to the key results of line managers. For example, a course in customer relations would be directly applicable to the goals of a manager of field service. To be effective and to lead to improved performance, the specific content must deal with the problems and/or skill deficiencies of the target audience. A good way to evaluate program content is by applying the following performance test.

A course passes the performance test if:

- The student can return to the work station and use the skill/knowledge within 24 hours;
- The use of the skill/knowledge will result in immediate performance improvement as measured by a positive change in profits, turnover, sales, quality of

products, scrap, morale, grievances, cost, etc.

If a course or portion of it fails the performance test, the offering should be dropped.

When managers of trainees are asked to spend time reinforcing newly learned skills, they will certainly complete the "performance test." If the course content fails the test, do not expect them to spend energy in creating a job environment which promotes program objectives.

Manager involvement

Once trainers determine that course offerings are critical to the success of managers, the trainer must convince managers to become involved in reinforcing newly acquired behaviors. To do this, the trainer must clearly demonstrate the link between program content and the manager's key result areas. Whether this is done in a group presentation or in a one-on-one discussion, the following points should be considered.

First, the trainer should uncover information which indicates any problems the manager may have. Unless a trainer knows exactly where managers "hurt," he or she is not ready for the encounter. The trainer must also identify present and future department goals and areas in which managers desire change.

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Once this information is collected, trainers can build a presentation which illustrates the link between course content and performance improvements. Without this direct link, managers may fail to see the benefits and, therefore, refuse to give active support.

Performance improvement data from past course offerings and successful case histories from other departments will further increase the chances of gaining the manager's involvement.

The actual selling presentation (individual or group) should proceed from an identification of manager needs (problems, desired changes, goals) to a demonstration of how the course content satisfies those needs. Avoid training jargon and replace it with terms familiar and relevant to the managers. Once a clear case has been made for the usefulness of the program, the trainer can then emphasize the importance of the manager's involvement in assuring that benefits will be realized. Once the manager accepts the need for the course and the importance of his or her involvement, the trainer can "close the sale" by describing the steps and actions (discussed earlier) that the manager must take to assure success. It is advisable to have a learning experience ready to offer the manager(s) which provides the skills/knowledge they will need to adequately support and reinforce their subordinates.

For training to pay off, trainers should form a partnership with the managers of course participants. By following the guidelines described in this article, there is a good chance that the organizational needs of both the trainer and the manager can be satisfied.