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The Promise of

Modern medicine has enjoyed periodic breakthroughs of enormous significance. Sulfa drugs, penicillin, antibiotics, chemotherapy, CAT scans, and the recent advent of statin drugs that lower blood pressure are examples of important pharmaceutical advances that transformed the practice of medicine.

Is it possible that the learning and development profession might enjoy such dramatic advancements? What could happen that would catapult us to an entirely new plateau of results? And where is that breakthrough most likely to occur?

Talk to any group of layman or professionals about what's broken in the current learning and development process, and most will tell you it's the lack of serious posttraining follow-through. Depending on how and what you count, there's approximately US\$50 billion spent in the United States each year on learning and development and related programs. Those expenditures result in a range of beneficial improvements.

But what if those results could be significantly greater by reallocating our efforts and resources to better align with the obvious need for additional follow-up activities?

Segmenting the learning process

For conceptual clarity, let's divide the learning and development process into the following three phases, while readily admitting that the lines are fuzzy:

Phase 1 consists of all the activities that happen prior to someone physically attending a session. That includes articles and books to read, questionnaires to be completed, or data to be collected.

Phase 2 describes the learning event itself. The event may be two hours in length or three months long. It may involve participants congregating in the same room or participants communicating via video-conferencing or some other form of distance learning.

Phase 3 begins after the learning event. It includes the subsequent activities that are designed to reinforce and strengthen the application of the learning.

Phase 3 is the focus of this article.

Fund allocation for each phase

We're not aware of any reliable data that accurately breaks out what organizations spend on each phase of the process. But after conferring with many colleagues, we estimate that most organizations spend less than 10 percent of their effort and dollars on Phase 1, and less than that, 5 percent, is spent on Phase 3. That data is reinforced by the oft-cited 1988 study by L.M. Saari, T.R. Johnson, S.D. McLaughlin, and D.M. Zimmerle, "A Survey of Management Training and Education Practices in U.S. Companies," that concluded any form of follow-up was rare. Clearly, learning and development efforts and dollars are focused primarily on Phase 2.

Phase 3

By Jack Zenger,
Joe Folkman,
and Robert Sherwin

After years of neglect, activities that happen after the learning event advance as the phase that makes learning stick.

But according to research done by Brent Peterson, while serving as director of research for the Franklin Covey organization, the value that each of those sectors contributes to the ultimate effectiveness of any learning effort is dramatically different from how we currently fund them. That disparity between potential impact and actual funding is evident in the chart on page 32.

We're not advocating that expenditures exactly parallel the value derived from each phase. But it's apparent that we're significantly underfunding and underemphasizing Phase 3 activities.

Learning and development objectives

We engage in learning activities because we want to produce some measurable result. In Kirkpatrick's terminology, that may be Level 1—to have satisfied participants—which is accomplished through a highly engaging Phase 2. In Kirkpatrick's hierarchy, achieving anything above that, including knowledge acquisition, behavior change, and bottom-line results, places increasing emphasis on effective follow-up—or Phase 3—activities.

The power of Phase 3

An effective Phase 3 process provides an enormous benefit to an organization because it enhances the degree to which any learning is put into practice; thus, it leverages the investment made in Phase 2 learning events. To improve Phase 3, a new environment must be created that provides periodic reminders to participants about the learned behavior and encourages that behavior's use.

Effective Phase 3 efforts are characterized by implementations in which

- any desired new behaviors are made specific
- participants make clear, public commitments to complete a task by a certain time
- participants know that there will be a consistent mechanism that holds them accountable
- participants are regularly reminded to plan for the next phase of implementation
- obstacles are anticipated, plans are put in place to overcome those obstacles, and vaccinations are prepared to prevent backsliding or having individuals' efforts gradually diluted
- good measurement tools are available to let managers and administrators of the learning process monitor the progress of the individual and group.

Specify new behaviors. A frequent complaint about many learning or development processes is that participants aren't clear about what they are to do when they return to work. They've acquired new information; they've rehearsed new skills; they may have altered some attitudes. A decided fuzziness still exists, however, about what's specifically being asked of them on the job. Thus, one key to effective Phase 3 follow-up is a high degree of specificity about what's expected of participants.

Make clear, public commitments. The likelihood that a desired action will occur increases when participants make oral and written commitments to others. Research has shown that the more near-term those goals are, the more likely it is that they'll be implemented. Good intentions aren't nearly as effective as written commitments.

Evaluate. Most learning and development processes include a fair amount of evaluation. Feedback instruments often rate the "Fs"—food, faculty, facilities, and fun. Noticeably missing from the typical evaluation is any assessment of what participants have done with what they learned. Learning and development must involve rigorous implementation accountability or it is to no avail. The great bulk of that accountability can only take place when participants leave the learning experience and know they'll be asked to report back with their results.

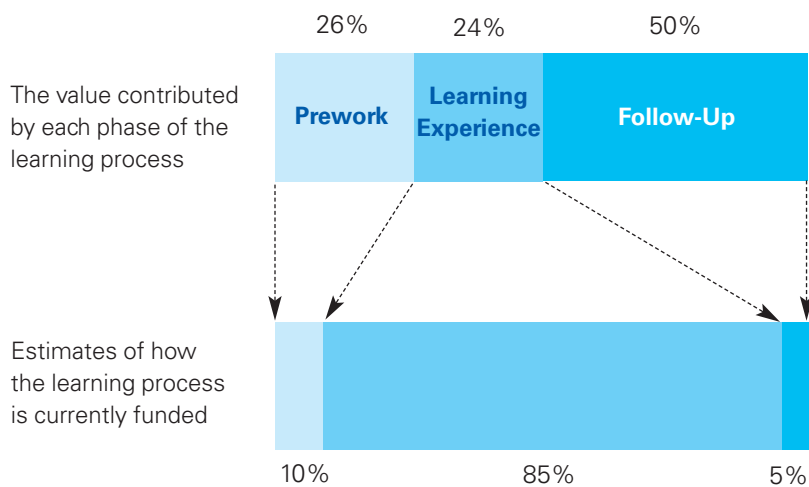
Plan the next phase. When participants return from a learning event, they're cast back into the maelstrom that is work. One of the real benefits of a formal learning and development process is that it protects participants from their jobs for a short amount of time and allows them to focus on learning.

But in Phase 3 that shield is gone. Commitments are diluted, and participants are distracted. Some mechanism has to remind them of the learning commitments they made, force them to assess their progress periodically, and help them plan their next steps. Those reminders may be self-generated or come from external sources.

Prevent relapse. Returning to a job inevitably brings the dilution of many other activities, and the strong temptation to revert to previous behaviors. Relapse prevention can be effective. Just taking the time to predict barriers and distractions, and deciding in advance how to react to those pressures can be an important first step.

Monitor individual and group progress. Seldom have organizations built in effective mechanisms by which to obtain any kind of granular analysis regarding the individual and group outcomes of a learning and development process. Who is taking action? What new behavior are they implementing? Where are they having greatest success? Where are the biggest challenges? How much effort are they putting forth? And how much progress has been made?

Segmenting the Learning Process



The influence of follow-up activities

To measure the impact of follow-up activities, 1165 managers participated in an employee survey. Each manager was given a feedback report that summarized the performance results of his or her work group. Managers were asked to perform two simple tasks as follow-through on the survey:

- Hold a feedback meeting with their work teams.
- Take action on one issue.

One year after the initial survey, a postsurvey was conducted in which employees were asked if their work groups used the survey

to make improvements. A comparison of employee satisfaction was made between the groups that did or did not follow up using the survey. The chart below shows those employee satisfaction results.

As is evident from the chart, group members responded 79 percent positively on an employee satisfaction index when follow-up meetings and change efforts occurred. On the other hand, only 34 percent of the group members responded positively on employee satisfaction when no follow-up work had taken place.

The cost and effort associated with the employee survey process was largely in creating the survey and ensuring that every employee completed it. The requested follow-up meetings didn't represent a substantial increase in time or effort for each manager, but a significant portion of managers never find the time to hold such meetings unless a great deal of pressure is placed on them.

Steps for better follow-up

In the *T+D* article "The New Leadership Development," the authors wrote:

"Leadership programs have traditionally been one- or two-week events. In participants' minds, when the event was over, leadership development for the year was over. The most effective leadership development programs in the future will transform an event into a process that lasts a participant's entire career.

"In lieu of a two-week session, we strongly favor the two-to-five day sessions spaced over 18 to 24 months. Between formal sessions, other learning mechanisms can occur. Formalized sessions are valuable because they shield participants from their jobs. Because people are working longer hours and everyone's pace has quickened, there's a need for formal protection to temporarily protect participants from the pressures of work. However, formal sessions should be viewed as punctuation marks, not the text.

"In the intervening times, online or telephone coaching can be useful, as are buddy groups. In addition, a series of email messages can maintain participants' connection. There should be a constant review

of the metrics showing results, including periodic reminders of the commitment and the changes that were agreed to."

TD "The New Leadership Development," January 2000, *T+D*.

Those paragraphs introduce a number of promising techniques:

Space learning events over time. One change that many organizations have implemented is to space learning events to create opportunities for application and then coming back to report, evaluate, and be re-energized.

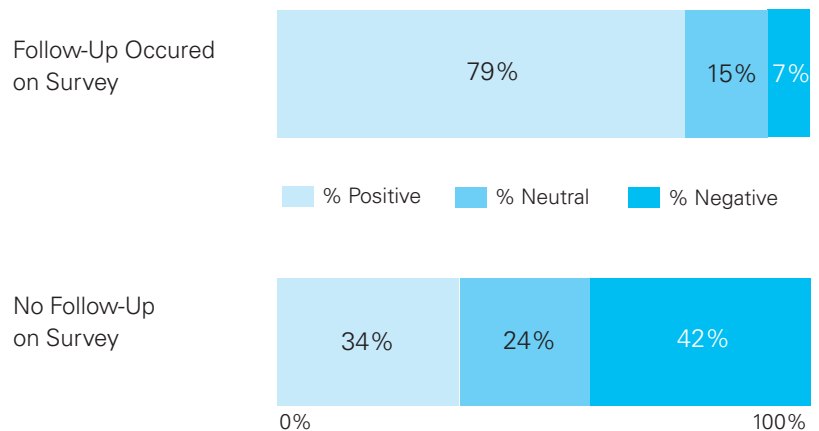
Create buddy systems or support groups. At the conclusion of any learning event, buddy systems can be created or lunch groups established to keep the implementation of learning moving forward by meeting on a regular basis.

Coach online or by telephone. A regularly scheduled telephone call from someone available to discuss implementation steps or any challenges that a participant has encountered has been shown to greatly increase the degree of implementation.

Encourage mentorships. Similarly, someone inside the organization who can mentor another employee performs a valuable service. By periodically touching base, a mentor shows interest in his or her participant's progress and offers assistance when needed.

Initiate job discussions. A manager or supervisor who regularly provides reminders to practice new behav-

Employee Satisfaction Results



iors is an asset. Evidence shows that a boss who initiates frequent discussions about job progress and career interests produces improved employee performance and productivity.

Manage yourself. Behavioral self-management, such as entering activities in a planner or adhering to a checklist, is the best kind of management. If employees create mechanisms to help them remember new behaviors or to eliminate inappropriate behaviors, that's a more powerful tool than most external influences. But only a small percent of people are successful in creating those mechanisms and sticking with them.

Send email reminders. Technology has provided a cost-effective and nonintrusive tool you can use to remind participants of the commitments they made in any learning and development process: email. Email represents an enormous breakthrough for our profession. Indeed, it may be our miracle drug.

Review metrics. Because of the lack of follow-up activities, learning and development professionals have to glean feedback about the learning process from anecdotes and general impressions. New technology and software provides detailed information about the effectiveness of development on a group and enables you to track the influence of that development on individuals.

Use 360-degree feedback surveys. Give participants, their peers, and their bosses a 360-degree feedback survey, and you can combine the obtained information into a report that participants can use to aid in their development. After reviewing the report, participants can select a few behaviors that they wish to improve. You can now conduct mini surveys that are easy and cost-effective, and focus specifically on the selected behaviors.

The Internet's effect

Given the pace and complexity of current work patterns, the Internet appears to be an effective tool to aid in the implementation and follow-up process. While the benefits of having a mentor call every week or two to discuss an employee's progress is obvious, email is a more economical vehicle to reach participants. An email can serve as a friendly reminder, ask for a brief assessment of progress, and encourage participants to plan their next steps to meet commitments made during the learning process.

By combining email contact with telephone contact, refresher sessions, and the opportunity to com-

plete further assessments, such as 360-degree feedback surveys, you enhance Phase 3's potential for success.

You can aggregate and analyze the data compiled through those processes in many ways. You can find out which participants are following through with their commitments; you can analyze the type of goals or commitments participants are selecting (and ignoring); and you can evaluate those goals and provide more challenging ones at a later date. Comparing the effectiveness of one training or development intervention with another is also now possible.

Phase 3 potential

It's obvious that more attention and resources need to focus on Phase 3 of the learning process. Enormous sums of money have been spent on designing engaging workshops and seminars. Even larger sums are spent to develop highly sophisticated e-learning. But until now, minimal creativity, innovation, and funding have been focused on the part of the learning process that ensures that learning sticks. If a fraction of the effort that has been put into Phase 2 is shifted to Phase 3, learning and development professionals will achieve their goal of transferring learning back to the workplace. **TD**

Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman are the co-founders of Zenger|Folkman, a professional services firm that helps clients deliver extraordinary results; jzenger@zfco.com; jfolkman@zfco.com. **Robert Sherwin** is the COO of Zenger|Folkman and the former CEO of Kaset and of FlipDog.com; bsherwin@zfco.com.