They May Love It But Will They Use It?

Involving the trainer, trainee and the trainee's manager before, during and after training can make training efforts result in changed work behavior.

By ARTY TROST

If we accept that training is a means to an end and not an end in itself, then our concern should be transferring learned skills to the job.

Training people in new behaviors — especially leadership, communication and other people-oriented skills — is too often an effort in futility. Even when there is active participation during the training and real eagerness to try out new skills, many trainees find it difficult if not impossible to transfer these skills to the work environment.

It takes time to develop new skills to a state of competency. During that time new behaviors often feel awkward and uncomfortable. Without active support and encouragement it is easy to slip back into old, familiar patterns before the new skills become established habits.

Therefore, the training needs to focus on the needs assessment, design and delivery process to build skills. These and additional tools can be used to increase the probability that your trainees will actually use what they've learned.

Organization pulse

A careful needs assessment is critical to determine: what the client sees as the issues and problems to be dealt with; what are the desired outcomes; and whether training is an appropriate part of the solution.

Trainers tend to approach organizational issues through a training-filtered lens. But trainers both must identify if training is an appropriate part of the solution and when it should be used in conjunction with other organizational efforts.

A training needs assessment process that includes the training department, the client (the person who is requesting the training program) and the potential participants and their managers is appropriate if training is called for. Even if the training will be offered on a sign-up basis (so that you don't know in advance who will elect to attend), it's possible to survey a group of people similar to the types of people for whom the training is targeted.

Contact these people and their managers to determine what they see as desirable behavior changes that might happen as a result of training. Ask potential trainees: "What do you need to know or be able to do in order to work more effectively?" Ask their managers: "What would make them more effective on the job?" Ask both: "How will job performance be different if the training is successful?"

Because so many people are used to thinking of topics, you may get responses such as "We need a good course in time management." A skilled trainer won't stop with this response, but will continue to probe with such questions as: "How will you know when they're managing their time better? What will be happening that isn't happening now?" Push for specific behavioral outcomes such as work being done on time, more cases being processed in a given amount of time and so on.

Ensuring the maximum amount of training transferability begins with the involvement of the potential participants and their

---

Arty Trost is principal of Organizational Dynamics, a consulting firm in Sandy, Ore., and co-author of Gaining Momentum for Board Action.

managers in an assessment that focuses on the specific behavior and skills needed.

Find out all you can about the organization in which the training will take place. This is especially important for external trainers. And internal trainers, especially in a large organization, shouldn't assume they already know it.

Each organization, department and profession has its own jargon, hot topics and current rumors. Most people absorb material better when you talk to them in their own language. It's not possible to learn all the terminology, but when you call people "supervisors" in an organization that refers to them as "managers" you set up a slight dissonance that makes it more difficult for people to relate to what is being said.

If there have been recent layoffs, anticipate that people may want to discuss the event, and their own job security and mobility. Knowing what the sore spots are and what to avoid saying can be just as important as knowing what to say.

If you're an external consultant, find out as much about the organization as you can. Ask for copies of the annual report, get organizational charts, ask for the names of top people, find out the most common jargon and acronyms. Ask yourself this helpful question: "Assuming I was a newly hired, technically competent individual, what would I need to know about this organization/department so I can fit in well here?"

Don't neglect to find out about other recent training that has been offered. As you reinforce and build upon prior learning you help ensure transferability of your training.

Training design

The training design plays a major part in determining transfer of learning. Pfeiffer and Jones mention a number of training design considerations that will enhance the participants' internalization and integration of training and thus its transferability to the job.

They focus on building a design where participants have an opportunity to: experience a new behavior, skill or activity; share reactions and observations with others; explore, discuss and evaluate the dynamics; develop general principles based on the experience; and apply and test the behaviors and principles.[1]

Malcolm Knowles and other leading practitioners also put emphasis on experiential training techniques, practical application, and the process of unfreezing and learning.[2]

Part of the training design should include a follow-up session, held four to six weeks after the initial training. This follow-up does not provide new material; it refines and polishes skills learned in the original training session and encourages continued use.

One way to increase the probability of reinforcement and support after the training is to train the trainees' supervisors first.

Four reasons why training is not transferred to the job can be dealt with by working with the trainees' managers beforehand. These are:

- Participants don't often analyze their strengths and weaknesses in the topic area and thus don't focus on their own developmental needs during the training.
- There is no mutual understanding between participants and their managers as to desirable outcomes of the training.
- Participants' managers may not understand their own role in reinforcing and supporting newly learned behaviors.
- Participants' managers may not know enough about the skills being taught to be able to identify and reinforce those skills back on the job.

It's amazing how often communication trainers don't practice good communication skills

A session that focuses on what managers can do before, during and after a training session to support and reinforce the training is needed to: prepare managers to sit down with their staff and mutually determine desirable outcomes for the up-coming training; familiarize the managers with key concepts and skills that will be offered during the training; help the managers assess their own role as coach, role model and reinforcer after the trainee returns to the job; and provide the managers with specific techniques for identifying and reinforcing the key behaviors trainees will be trying to apply.

Many managers are willing to take the time for this training because it increases the value of their staff's training. Managers also become aware of their own needs for additional training as they learn about the skills their subordinates will be acquiring.

During training

Even a careful needs assessment and a superb training design don't ensure that participants will apply what they learn back on the job. Skilled trainers are aware of the need to begin each training session with a mini-needs assessment that asks the group about their expectations for the training session. The initial needs assessment may no longer be totally relevant; more crucial needs may have arisen, and people in the session may not have participated in the original assessment process.

A few helpful questions are: "What two or three things do you most want to learn from this training? When we're done and you look back on the training, what will you have learned that will make you say it was well worth the time? What will you be doing differently as a result of this training?"

You can ask everyone to write down responses that become their personal learning objectives. Afterward, they should share their objectives while you record the responses on a flip chart. (In a small group everyone may share one specific learning objective; in a larger group only some of the people may be able to share.

You can now use the objectives to:

- mentally determine how much you will need to tailor your training design;
- show people how their personal learning objectives fit into the training objectives (and so reassure them that the training will be on-target);
- tell people when their personal objectives are not compatible with the training objectives and cannot be incorporated;
- have a visual reminder that you're on track as the training progresses.

As people write down and then "publish" their own learning objectives they become more committed to meeting those objectives and focusing more closely on the entire training process.[3]

Trainers serve as a role model and need to demonstrate the skills they're teaching. It's amazing how often communication trainers don't practice good communication skills. They cut off participants' questions, move on to other topics before the group is ready and fail to use listening responses.

Trainers also should be able to analyze the component parts of the skills being taught and demonstrate them to the group. You may be a superb listener but you need to be able to point out the verbal and nonverbal responses that accompany good listening so that the group sees all the facets of what it is observing. It is difficult for someone to practice a new skill on the job if he or she hasn't actually observed its correct use. Many trainers use video and audio tapes to provide examples of good and poor practices. But if you aren't modeling good examples you undermine your credibility.

In order to try out new skills on the job, people have to familiarize themselves with the skills in the training itself. A training design that incorporates skill practice takes more time than one which depends on lecture and discussion but is critical if people are to use those skills on the job.

People can't learn to ski by listening to an instructor or watching a movie, but many think they can learn new communication techniques by listening to an instructor and discussing what is presented.

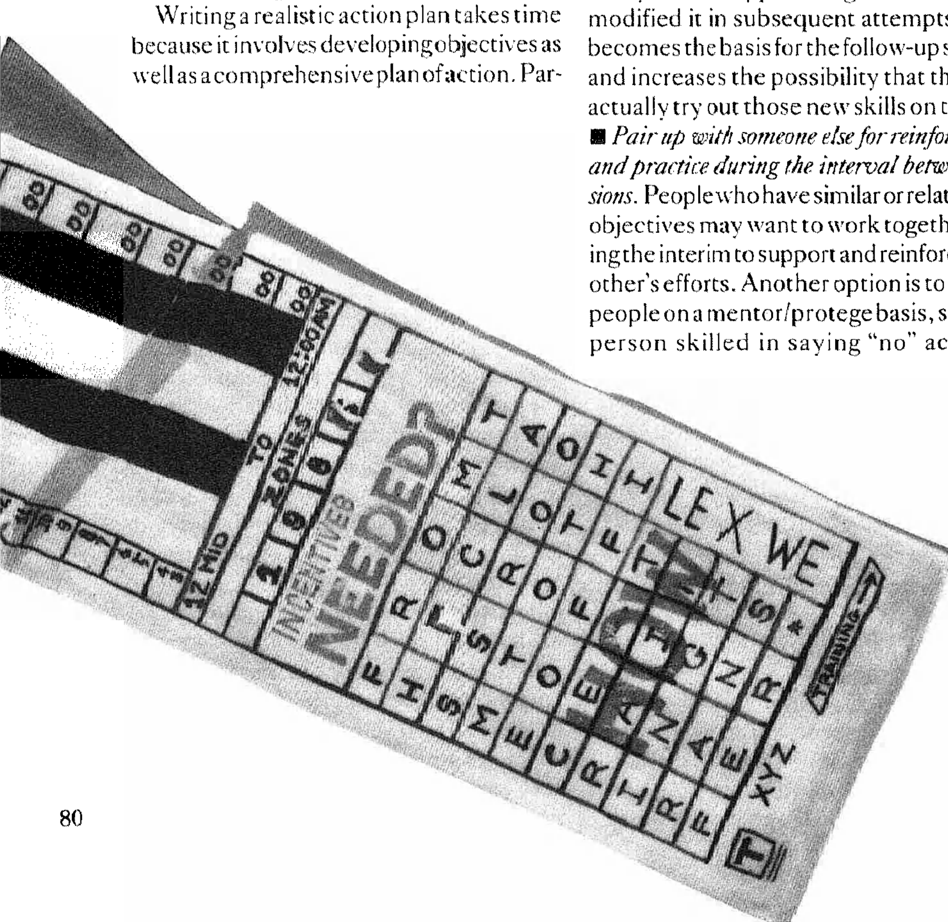
It's not enough for people to try out new behaviors in class: They must also receive immediate feedback on what they're doing and coaching on how to improve. The first few tries are usually awkward and uncomfortable. Role-playing artificiality and awkwardness decrease markedly when people have a chance to re-do a particular role play—especially if they are given feedback and coaching after their initial attempt.

Writing down a goal and then verbally "publishing" it is a powerful factor in maintaining commitment to that goal.[4] Many trainers end their sessions with participants developing a plan of action they will put into effect once the training is over. The possibility of true job transference is increased if these plans of action: are limited to no more than three objectives (trying out a new skill learned during the class, redeveloping an unused or seldom-used skill, committing oneself to reinforce a currently used skill); offer an opportunity to assess the difficulties in implementing the plan; and are shared with the total group.

Writing a realistic action plan takes time because it involves developing objectives as well as a comprehensive plan of action. Participants should look at the obstacles to skill and behavior transfer: What might cause problems? Whom do they need to involve? What initial step will they try as soon as they get back to their job?

During the publishing stage, trainees must determine how realistic they are about what they want to accomplish and how willing they are to carry out those objectives. Additional incentive for using these new skills on the job comes from their knowledge that in four to six weeks they will be coming back for a follow-up session. During that session they will be discussing in detail what they put into practice and how successful such efforts were.

One way that participants' managers can support training efforts during the training itself is to encourage them not to go to their desks or make work-related calls during the training session—even during the breaks and meal periods. This allows the participants to focus more fully on the training and is especially important when the training is done on-site.



The interim

The following steps keep the training ongoing during the period between the initial sessions and follow-up:

■ *Document efforts.* The participants document their attempts to try out the new skills, noting what they tried, when they tried it and with whom, what problems occurred, if they tried the approach again and how they modified it in subsequent attempts. This becomes the basis for the follow-up session and increases the possibility that they will actually try out those new skills on the job.

■ *Pair up with someone else for reinforcement and practice during the interval between sessions.* People who have similar or related skill objectives may want to work together during the interim to support and reinforce each other's efforts. Another option is to pair up people on a mentor/protege basis, so that a person skilled in saying "no" acts as a resource to someone trying to develop that skill. Partners can exchange copies of their action plans. It becomes their responsibility to meet during the interim to find out how each is progressing.

■ *Provide reinforcement and support.* The trainer, the participants' managers, other training participants and co-workers can be used as a support system during the interval between the training and the follow-up session.

Managers, helped by training they received before their staff began the training, review their subordinates objectives, coach them as they work toward those objectives and provide feedback about their efforts.

Participants work with their training partner during this interval to discuss progress, share successes and receive support during periods of discouragement.

Follow-up

Trainers can build a time-interval between sessions, or they can use the follow-up session to provide new material (rather than using it primarily to build on what happened in the original training).

To ensure skill transfer, the follow-up should not present new material: It should review what has occurred since the training, what worked and what didn't work, and what trainees need to practice further. This means that the day is primarily an "emerging design" with participants fine-tuning those skills they found difficult to use at work. It may mean additional skill practice similar to what they received in the initial training or it may mean additional material to help them use their skills more effectively.

One-shot sessions are not enough. People need to try out newly learned skills on the job and then come back together to fine-tune those skills and receive encouragement.

Before participants leave the follow-up session they develop a new action plan for themselves. Often it is a refinement of their original action plan; sometimes it is related to but not similar to their initial plan. Usually participants become more realistic about their action plans.

At this time participants should incorporate one new skill, redevelop a prior skill and reinforce an existing skill. Once they feel they've succeeded—and that may be months—they can go back to the training materials to build action plans for additional skills.

Part of the action plan is how they will use existing resources: their manager, their training partner, co-workers, colleagues and written resources.

Post-training

Successful training means the following steps are taken after sessions are closed:

■ *Provide access to resources.* If the original trainer isn't available, participants should have names and phone numbers of someone who can provide similar resources. A brief annotated bibliography might be provided for each training session (most people won't seek out and read more than two or three books on a topic). Discussing them with the group increases the likelihood that people will use them. Bring copies so participants can peruse them when they have time. The same holds true for audio or video cassettes that you recommend.

■ *Encourage documentation.* Many people will not keep a journal of their attempts to develop new skills, but a surprising number will. You may want to suggest that they use a format similar to the one they used during the interim period, so that they can chart their efforts and their progress.

■ *Follow-up with the participants' managers.* You want the managers to provide the same coaching, feedback and reinforcing skills that they did during the interval period. Send them a memo announcing that the training is completed. Restating some of the ways managers can ensure training transfer remotivates them to work with the staff returning from training.

Certainly these methods won't let you offer a 100-percent money-back guarantee that trainees will use on the job what they've learned in training. Perhaps the primary drawback is that each method takes additional time and commitment on everyone's part. But involving the trainees' managers and establishing follow-up sessions increase your chances for success.

References

[1]Pfeiffer, J. W., & Jones, J. E. (1977). *Reference guide to handbooks and annuals* (2nd ed.), 2-28. San Diego: University Associates.

[2]Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education*, 50-51. Chicago: Association Press.

[3]Cialdini, R. B. (1984). *Influence: How and why people agree to things*, 86, 90. New York: Morrow.

[4]*Ibid.* 87-89.