

THE COACHING CONTROVERSY . . . REVISITED

BY JACK
KONDRASUK

Many people have previously extolled the superiority of coaching as a training technique. Otto and Glaser stated that there is "ample evidence coaching is best."⁷ Huggens stated that coaching leads to better retention than other training approaches: "We remember . . . 75 percent through supervised doing (coaching)."³ Whitty said that coaching is the most important technique for training salespeople.¹⁰ None of the preceding offered empirical evidence to substantiate their claims for coaching. I conducted an empirical study to examine the accuracy of such statements.

The August 1979 issue of the *Training and Development Journal* contained my article comparing the effectiveness of on-the-job coaching with an off-the-job seminar.⁴ In that (pretest/posttest with control group) experiment, the seminar was seen as more effective than coaching. Coaching fared no better than a control group that received no training.

Even more discouraging from a coaching standpoint was the finding that time spent in coaching had no statistically significant relationship to the criterion measures of success. The results were consistent with Goldstein's statement that, "Unfortunately, most on-the-job training programs are not planned and, thus, don't work well."²

Producing results contrary to the beliefs of many people, I expected resistance to my article . . . especially from those who had publicly espoused the superiority of coaching and from those who earned their living from selling coaching as a training approach. Although I received many favorable responses regarding my August article, I did not have long to wait for a negative view of my article.

The November 1979 issue of the *Training and Development Journal* included Neil Rackham's article questioning two aspects of my study (skill versus knowledge and coaching effectiveness), presenting his case for the superiority of coaching.⁸ For the sake of helping

to resolve the question of coaching effectiveness, I feel it is important to discuss some of the issues raised by Rackham.

Knowledge Versus Skill

In my study, I equated knowledge and skill for purposes of criterion measurement in that situation. Rackham protested that knowledge and skills could not be synonymous in my study. He felt that, because paper-and-pencil tests and ratings were used, they could not measure skills — and coaching only affected skills, not knowledge. The content of the training in my study was management by objectives (MBO). If a subordinate brings in four different ways to state a job objective and asks the supervisor which they should use in their joint goal setting of the subordinate's job objectives (which is stated best), the supervisor needs to make a decision. Is that decision evidence of knowledge or skill? There were a number of such items in my criterion test. To infer, as Rackham did, that a written test cannot measure skill, is open to question.

The appropriateness of a given form of test would seem to vary with the situation.

Using one of Rackham's examples (low-level physical activity skills) — swimming — a paper-and-pencil test would probably not do a good job of assessing an individual's ability to actually swim. However, to measure a management or professional skill that involves more mental than physical skill such as writing memos (or writing job objectives in MBO), a paper/pencil test may be quite appropriate. The point is that not all jobs, especially at the higher organization levels, require mainly gross body movements. Maybe we need to take a closer look at what comprises "knowledge" and "skills."

The definitions of "skills" and "knowledge" apparently have changed over time. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, between 1500-1800 A.D., the two words were used interchangeably. Present definitions discern a difference. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, "knowledge" is now defined as being acquainted with the facts, knowing, learning, that which is grasped by the mind. "Skill" is defined as relating to ability and proficiency (especially with physical movements).

It appears that "knowledge" is a hypothetical construct. It is used to help us better understand behavior, but it cannot be directly observed or measured. *The only way we can tell if someone "knows" something is if that person demonstrates the knowledge* (i.e. does something from which we can infer his/her knowledge). For instance, the only way we can tell if a manager knows how to apply MBO is to measure his/her behavior regarding MBO. That could consist of: assessing the job objectives actually developed, assessing the person's process of developing job objectives, or completing a test on MBO theory and application. Naturally, the closer the measurement device is to actual job performance, the more predictive it will be of actual performance on the job.

"Skill" is supposed to relate to physical activity. However, as pointed out previously, we measure "knowledge" through physical activity also (even if it is only making a mark on a test). We have no way of knowing if an inert/motionless person has knowledge about anything; the person must *do* something. In higher-level jobs such as those in management, we find a very amorphous dividing line between the measurement of "skills" and the measurement of "knowledge."

Perhaps we should pay more attention to the criterion behavior we seek to achieve and the method(s) used to evaluate the extent to which we have achieved that criterion — trying to achieve as close a relationship between the final criterion and the evaluation measurement device(s) as possible. However, we must also consider the extent to which the criterion behaviors are or are not under the control of the trainer.

In an earlier *Training and Development Journal* article I argued

for assessing most management training programs at the learning level due to the large number of uncontrolled factors at the behavior and results levels (such as the job situation not rewarding nor allowing the trained behavior to occur).⁵

Rackham stated that the "possession or lack of knowledge is no measure of skill."⁸ Personally, I would hate to ride a bus where the bus driver did not *know* how to drive the bus. A person may know some principles but not be able to know how to put them together so as to know the whole activity; however, it is highly unlikely that a person can *have* the skill without *knowing* the skill. A person having the skill to act need not have the skill to verbalize such action.

Rackham appears to have misread my article and felt that I was equating, to use his example, "know[ing] how a rear-axle differential works" to "teach[ing] anyone to drive a car." I certainly do not think "knowing" how a rear axle works is necessary or sufficient to

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be able to teach someone to drive a car! However, I do feel that "knowing" how to drive a car is necessary to be able to actually drive a car (the "skill"). If the potential driver does not "know" that turning the key starts the engine, pushing on the accelerator pedal increases the speed of the car when in gear, etc., that person will have a very difficult time actually driving the car.

To recapitulate, maybe knowledge (at least at the management level) is the hypothetical construct that indicates "something" is in our brain (the conceptual level). Maybe "skill" is demonstrating that ability (the operational level).

Coaching Effectiveness

My experiment found that the seminar was effective and coaching was ineffective in the situation I examined (with those participants, at that time/place and with those training and measurement devices). Rackham countered by strongly stating that coaching was effective. However, many of his statements and conclusions were made without data to support them.

Rackham felt that skills training always had a "results dip" which occurred immediately after skills training. Over what period of time this occurred, with what types of training and to what extent it occurred is not clear as no evidence was offered to substantiate the "results dip." In fact, it would probably be as easy to find examples of where results did not dip as when they did. Most trainers would hate to think of their training always resulting in *poorer* results after training — whether or not coaching followed the initial training — and never increasing results immediately after training! What data is there to show that a "results dip" always occurs?

Rackham does provide a significant contribution to the training profession by bringing forth information on two Xerox studies. Xerox appears to have an excellent reputation for developing managers. It could be assumed that their training is the most effective they could obtain under the circumstances. However, what works for Xerox may not work somewhere

else. Also, we need much more information than what was provided before we can validly judge the effectiveness of a training technique.

The first Xerox study mentioned in Rackham's article stated that "in the absence of follow-up coaching 87 percent of the skills change brought about by the program was lost."⁸ Does this mean that coaching saved 87 percent, or does it mean that 87 percent of some unknown form of training lost 87 percent of its effectiveness over some unknown period of time at some unknown location at some unknown point in time regarding some unknown "skill" for some unknown number and types of trainees? If so, how great was the effectiveness loss in the presence of follow-up coaching?

The second Xerox study mentioned, according to Xerox managers I talked with, apparently was conducted in England. Rackham talked about "results" in that study showing that coaching was effective. I conducted an additional (unpublished) study showing that on-the-job results of seminar trainees increased 22 percent . . . but that study, like Rackham's example as stated, suffered from a number of flaws. In the study Rackham mentioned we again fail to have adequate information on the number of people trained.

Since there were only 35 salespeople in the branch where the study occurred (smaller than the 39 participants in my study . . . which Rackham called "very small"), there could not be more than 35 in the Xerox study he described. There did not appear to be any comparison (or control) group, so it is entirely possible that the same or better changes would have occurred even if coaching was *not* conducted. Maybe a new sales manager, new incentives or a changed economic climate produced the results stated in his article. (We training professionals cannot always take credit for *everything!*)

From a research standpoint, the study (as described) would not qualify as a true experiment and thus would not be able to legiti-

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mately infer causation (coaching causing improved results). There may have been factors other than coaching that caused the results.

If coaching is so effective and the best training technique, why do so many "coaching programs," including the ones mentioned by Rackham (Honeywell Europe and Rackham's sales training course for Xerox) use classroom training to teach the skill of coaching? According to Xerox sales managers, Rackham's "coaching program" at Xerox starts with three days of classroom training (for sales managers) on how to coach. Then the sales managers come back periodically to the classroom setting for other sessions over a 13 to 14-week period. Is this follow-up coaching (as Rackham stated) or follow-up classroom training? He trained the trainers in the classroom; they trained their subordinates on the

job by coaching them. If pure coaching is more effective, why isn't the skill of coaching developed entirely by coaching rather than in the classroom?

Then there is the question of efficiency. Rackham stated, "Coaching is the only cost-effective way to reinforce new behaviors and skills until a learner is through the dangerous results dip."⁸ Having one coach/trainer (sales manager in this case) per trainee could be quite expensive. The sales manager only observes the salesperson; the sales manager does not try to make a sale during that time nor do work other than train the subordinate salesperson. So the salary of the sales manager and the potential sales lost must be considered costs under this approach. The benefits also need to be assessed and compared to all of the costs. This approach to coaching

may or may not be cost-effective. None-the-less, Rackham made a very strong (and questionable) statement in saying that coaching is the *only* cost-effective approach.

Rackham said the three key factors in deciding whether to use off-the-job or on-the-job training methods are 1) reinforcement needs, 2) learning overload, and 3) skills versus knowledge. I contend that these are of little help in differentiating between the two methods. Reinforcement usually helps with either method. Rackham stated that we can "cram knowledge into people at high pressure"⁸ but not overload trainees with skills; considering that he offered no evidence to back such an assertion, it is of questionable use as a decision rule.

He stated we should use classroom training for knowledge and coaching for job skills. Yet Xerox

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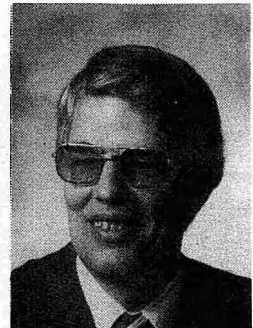
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"The strength of our training profession is being able to critically analyze and improve."

managers said that *Rackham used classroom training to teach sales managers how to coach* (presumably, coaching is a skill area). I propose, as Goldstein² has done, that we select a training method based on the objectives we seek to achieve and which method, based on the best available evidence, is most effective and efficient in helping us to reach those objectives.

Where to From Here?

Both the coaching and seminar approaches have advantages and disadvantages. We need to look at our objectives and see which approach (or combination) best achieves the training objectives. Perhaps the difference is more relative than absolute. If the seminar with 35 participants who are using a role-playing technique loses 34 members, the lecture/discussion becomes "giving advice, suggesting and talking," the role playing becomes "practice, cor-

recting and encouraging," the instructor becomes a "coach," and the seminar becomes "coaching" (all elements of French's definition of coaching¹).

Perhaps the important aspects to look at are not the methods/techniques but rather how they are applied. Maybe the principles of learning such as making goals specific, practicing the new behaviors, reinforcing "good" behaviors, seeking to make the training as much like the actual job as possible, and feedback are important. For instance, Scheicher recently found, in training people in the "skill" of writing, that feedback alone was more beneficial than training alone. The combination of training and feedback, however, was the most beneficial.

Perhaps the important element is not follow-up coaching (or any other specific training technique) but rather just the idea of follow-up. As Rackham pointed out, it is not enough just to provide one training session and then forget the trainees after that. Whether the training is done on or off-the-job may be of little consequence. Whether it is called "knowledge" or "skill" may not make much difference either. We cannot assess any evidence of either unless the trainee physically does something. Those desired behaviors and their results are the important aspects. Then again, maybe "knowledge" and "skill" will be the next controversy. . . .

Almost 20 years ago McGehee and Thayer stated: ". . . there are little or no data from carefully controlled experiments on the effectiveness of on-the-job training as contrasted with other methods of training."⁶ Very little seems to have change since then. Maybe we need to spend less effort in making claims and more effort in assessing claims regarding training approaches. Hopefully, this coaching controversy will engender more assessment of the effectiveness of coaching . . . as well as the effectiveness of other training approaches and related assumptions.

The strength of our training profession is being able to critically analyze and improve as a result of such analysis. We owe a debt of gratitude to the *Training and Development Journal* for acting as a forum to allow such analysis to take place.

Appreciation is expressed to Mary Devlin and Nancy Wilkes for assistance in locating background information for this article.

EDITOR'S NOTE: What do you think? We would like to hear from other readers regarding the "Coaching Controversy." Please forward your thoughts, comments, etc. to: *Training and Development Journal*, P.O. Box 5307, Madison, WI 53705.

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Jack Kondrasuk is assistant professor, University of Portland, Oregon. He is a member of ASTD, the American Society for Personnel Administrators and the Academy of Management.

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