

“TRAINING MUST NOT END WHEN INSTRUCTION ENDS. THIS MEANS TRAINING CANNOT BE SOLELY THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE TRAINING DEPARTMENT!”

TRAINING AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE

BY SAUL W.
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The most compelling question facing the trainer who is more concerned with results than with methods is this: *Why are training results so often limited to changing someone's vocabulary, but not his or her behavior? Why is it so much easier to teach someone to answer a question correctly in class than to apply that answer overtly to his or her work?*

I do not believe the answer lies in the way subject matter is presented. By this, I do not mean to imply that course design is unimportant. Good course design is a necessary, but by itself insufficient component of effective training — if by “effective” we mean that some lasting and desired change is detectable in the overt behavior of the student after training has taken place.

This definition of training effectiveness is particularly appropriate where interpersonal skills are involved. No matter what changes may have taken place in someone's way of thinking, if those

who work with that person on a day-to-day basis perceive no change in the way he or she acts, then for all practical purposes the individual has not changed and his or her training has been ineffectual!

To understand just where the problem lies and how it can be dealt with, we have to examine not just training itself, but also the learning context in which it occurs. That is, we must look at training in the light of both the learning that has preceded it and the learning that follows.

For training purposes, an adult can be defined as someone who has overlearned what he or she already knows and does. All adult training is in unequal competition with pre-existing habits, especially those which are supported by simply conforming to whatever one's colleagues are doing and to what one's superiors presumably expect. This is formidable competition, and the sheer mathematics of the situation militate against effectiveness for unsupported training.

Consider, for example, a

30-year-old manager attending a one-week course. Whatever that manager learned in that week — no matter how cleverly it was organized and how engagingly it was presented — must compete with what he or she has learned, practiced and been rewarded for during the preceding 1,560 weeks. There is *no* way of packaging or purveying ideas that can compete, alone, with those odds.

Adult training needs support to survive; otherwise it is futile. And this support must be given before training, as well as afterward!

Pretraining Support

Minor behavior modifications are far more likely to be accomplished than major changes, for the same reason that it is much easier to deflect the course of a rushing stream than to dam or reverse it. Training that simply attempts to extend existing habits or to implant ideas consistent with those already known and understood is more likely to survive than training that sets out to replace an old repertoire with a new one.

Therefore, training ought not to

be overly ambitious. But, if it is selective and well-aimed, it can be something better: it can be useful. This means, in practice, that effective behavior modification must be preceded by a reconnaissance to determine what habits already exist and which small modifications of those habits might be most useful. Neglecting to support training by determining, in advance, the context of previous learning in which it must somehow embed itself is, alas, a common source of training failure. We are often too romanced with what we want to teach or with how we want to teach it to give much attention to the mass of learning that has already occurred, and with which we must unavoidably compete.

Since training is, in a sense, an intrusion into an existing pattern of behavior and belief, the reasons for it must be readily apparent to the trainees . . . otherwise training will be resisted or, more likely, patiently endured until they can return, relieved, to the comfort of

old habits. This is no particular problem when one is training beginners, for whom the need for training is self-evident. But it can be a serious matter when one is attempting to upgrade skills or help experienced people overcome unproductive habits.

It is necessary that the connection between altering one's habits and achieving some desired goal be abundantly clear. Apart from whatever extrinsic motivators (for example, preserving one's employability) may be involved, it should be evident to the trainees that they will be able to do their jobs better with training than they could ever hope to do without it. Once again, this presupposes a reconnaissance in which the prospective trainees' own dissatisfactions with their work results is somehow established.

In brief, training that is tailored to the specific habits and understood needs of the group to be trained is much more likely to be accepted by that group than training, no matter how sophisticated or elegant it may be, that is taken off the trainer's shelf.

Post-Training Support

No training program supports itself . . . and unsupported learning inevitably dies. This is because the old learning with which it competes is doubly supported: by force of habit, and by conforming to other people's expectations. At best, then, all that classroom training accomplishes is to prepare the student to benefit from on-the-job feedback and reinforcement — if any is forthcoming at all.

Training's need for managerial support is real enough, but its plea therefore has become a cliché. There are two reasons for this unfortunate turn: the plea is misdirected and it is entirely too vague.

Support is typically assumed to be necessary all the way from the top down: as if supervisors were incapable of initiative without higher-level encouragement, and as if executives knew and cared precisely how supervisors do their jobs. Appeals for support should be directed precisely to those levels of management that must act

(or react) differently if training is to take hold: not over their heads to rarified levels whose effect, if any, on the outcome of training is at best indirect. Further, the appeal should be based on doing the job better, not on basking in the approbation of superiors.

The nature of the "support" that is sought is seldom defined precisely, but is usually understood as taking either of two forms: first . . . pious statements of approval, frequently written for executive signature by training managers themselves and containing little that any sane person could disagree with; secondly . . . conspicuous rewards for those who put their training into practice or conspicuous restraint from rewarding old habits that trainers have sought to replace. Neither form of support is particularly important: the first because it is too weak, the second because it is too rare, and both because they occur too remotely from places where training can be put into practice.

The people whose behavior has the greatest impact on that of the trainee are those with the most frequent day-to-day contact with him or her, not those with the most exalted rank over the trainee. Statements of support *per se* have only ritual value, since what people do matters far more, in the end, than what they say. Merely being in favor of training has no effect on it, and therefore need not be encouraged. But certain specific actions in response to what trainees do can affect training considerably, and are therefore worthwhile seeking out. Three specific kinds of supportive behavior are especially valuable: reinforcement, rehearsal and explanation.

Newly learned skills are not yet supported by habit and familiarity, and are therefore too easily "snuffed out" unless an interim support is provided. New behavior is much more sensitive to its immediate consequences than entrenched behavior. Any consequence that makes new behavior more likely to recur is called "reinforcement."

It is common, but erroneous, to

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assume that reinforcement, to be effective, must be imposing and perhaps even expensive. On the contrary, a simple acknowledgment that one is doing what is expected of him or her is usually quite sufficient. But it is also rare, because it seems to belabor the obvious, and it seems unlikely that so mild an action could have an important effect. Wrong on both counts; but that is why the infant mortality rate among training programs is so appalling.

It is much easier to transfer information into someone's head, so that he or she can recite it when asked, than to transfer the information to muscles so that his or her actions conform to what the individual knows. The best way to train people to *do* what is appropriate, instead of merely to know what is appropriate, is to ask them to go through the actual motions . . . to rehearse it. When the need for action occurs only intermittently (in other words, when the job itself does not supply enough rehearsals), periodic acting out of assigned roles is the best assurance that, when the occasion requires it, training rather than instinct will prevail.

Growth of Technology

The growth of technology has — regrettably — increased the number of monotonous, repetitive jobs. While job enrichment sometimes offers an escape from tedium, it is frequently unfeasible. This means that, as a practical matter, we must very often find ways of persuading people to do work well that they would rather not do at all, or which at any rate they will quite naturally tend to do badly. In these circumstances, it is helpful periodically to remind people of the reasons why the job had best be done in ways that they might find inconvenient or unattractive. Explanations will not make the work more attractive, but they can help to make it less oppressive and encourage actions that otherwise get precious little support.

Reinforcement, rehearsal and explanation are all rather mundane. They can scarcely compete for professional interest with more exotic activities, such as organiza-

tion development. But they are essential supports for training; so essential, in fact, that at least as large a share of the training budget should be invested in ensuring that they occur as in training itself. To fail to ensure that training is supported is rather like scattering expensive seed on unplowed fields, and then neglecting to water, weed, fertilize or protect it from pests.

Training simply must not end when instruction ends. In practice, this means that training cannot be solely the responsibility of the training department. In most organizations, the only feasible agency through which training can be sustained after instruction is the foreman or first-level supervisor. No one else has the necessary opportunities for frequent, face-to-face contact.

Therefore the supervisor must

be enlisted in the cause of training. Indeed, any organization whose supervisors do not consider themselves as agents or extensions of the training department, with continuing and specific responsibilities for supporting what has been taught after the teaching has ended, is probably foredoomed to a relatively low yield from its training investment — and this regardless of the merits of the training department or its courses per se.

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