

# ROBERT BRINKERHOFF

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Brinkerhoff, a former naval officer, is well-known for his innovative ideas on training evaluation, including high-impact learning and the Success Case Method, which measures the effectiveness of training by focusing on the least and most successful learners. Companies such as Bank of America, Cisco Systems, Dow Chemical, and State Farm Insurance have adopted the Success Case Method.



## Q | WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB, AND WHAT LESSON DID YOU TAKE AWAY FROM IT?

After I graduated from college, I joined the Navy and went to officer candidate school. My first real job there was as a training officer. People would go off, get trained for a week or two, come back to their base, and their commanding officer would tell them: “You know, there are two ways we do things—the way we do ‘em here and the way you learn ‘em in training.”

One of the lessons I got from that was that no matter how good the quality of the instruction was, the training might not work. I began to see subconsciously that context had everything to do with whether training worked or not. You had to design the instruction well, but just because you did so did not mean that you were going to get results from it.

## Q | TELL US ABOUT THE RESEARCH HISTORY BEHIND THE SUCCESS CASE METHOD?

I did my doctorate and all my graduate school assistantships in evaluation, and I was doing evaluation of all these big national and federal programs. I saw that so much of that evaluation work never got used. I saw the same thing going on in the private sector. People were doing evaluation because they felt they had to, and they never did it in a way that was useful to help guide action.

Because the failures of training were so rarely explained by failures of the training itself, my colleagues and I changed the focus with the Success Case Method. We didn’t use it to evaluate the training, we used it to evaluate how well the company was using the training to get results.

We finally came up with what was not only a quicker and easier method of getting results, but it was actionable, and people could make better decisions about using training resources in a way that would pay off.

## Q | WHAT IS A CHANGE YOU’D LIKE TO SEE IN THE FIELD OF HUMAN PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT?

Throughout the last 30 or 40 years, learning and development in organizations has really matured so that it is often its own function. There are corporate universities and training departments.

An implicit myth that’s gone along with that growth and success is that you can delegate accountability for results from training, to the training department. The reality is that it’s the whole organization’s responsibility to get training results.

## Q | HOW DO YOU THINK CONTEXT CAN DRAMATICALLY AFFECT THE IMPACT OF A COMPANY’S TRAINING PROGRAMS?

About 20 years ago, I was working with a small group of people doing evaluations. We found that even in the same class of people in the same course, you could find one person that went back and used the training really well and another person who didn’t do anything with it.

One time, I followed up with two people who were both very bright, young, emerging leaders. They had both aced the test in the training. They both reported on their evaluation that it was the best training they’d ever gone through.

When I followed up with both of them, I found that one of them was just doing phenomenally with the training. I followed up with the other person, and not only had he done nothing at all with the training, but he was, in fact, looking for a different job. How can you have two people that learned the training well, looked forward to using it, and then had such different results?

The differences were explained by the relationships they had with their managers, and the extent to which their managers had prepared. One of them had been forced to go to the training, and he had to give up taking his son to a baseball game on his birthday with his friends. So there were all these context factors that just doomed the training for the one person. There was nothing wrong with the training.

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