





WHY (MOST) TRAINING IS USELESS

By David H. Maister

START DEVELOPING SKILLS; STOP **WASTING** TIME.

Many companies—if not most—use training as a business version of a “quick weight loss” program. They hope that by training people in new things, they can quickly bring about behavioral changes among their employees. It almost never works. Training is a wonderful last step in a committed program for long-term change, but an almost useless first step, especially when it is being used as a substitute for changes in managerial behavior.

For much of my professional life, I have been paid to do training. It has been very well received in the sense that I have (usually) obtained high ratings, and clients not only paid their bills but invited me back to do it again and again.

However, I now believe that the majority of business training—by

me and by everyone else—is a waste of money and time because only a microscopic fraction of training is ever put into practice with the hoped-for benefits obtained.

Unfortunately, training and other kinds of meetings and conferences are too often organized as stand-alone events, with a life of their own, disconnected from the firm's progress.

Companies train people in new areas but then send them back to their operating groups, to the same measures and management approaches as before.

People can detect immediately a lack of alignment between what they are being trained to do and how they are being managed. When they do detect it, little, if any, of what has been discussed or “trained” ever gets implemented.



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If it's worth doing training,
it's worth doing it in a
way that's going to make
a difference. That means
preparing and using
session time wisely.



A good example of ill-conceived (and premature) training approaches is seen in the many calls I get to conduct training programs to help people become better managers. I put my callers through a standard set of questions:

- Did you choose people for managerial roles because they were the type of people who could get their fulfillment and satisfaction out of helping other people shine rather than having the ego need to shine themselves? (No!)
- Did you select them because they had a prior history of being able to give a critique to someone in such a way that the other person responds: "Wow, that was really helpful. I'm glad you helped me see all that." (No!)
- Do you reward these people for how well their group has done for their own personal accomplishments in generating business and serving clients? (Both, but with an emphasis on their personal numbers!)

"So, let's summarize," I say. "You've chosen people who don't want to do the job and who haven't demonstrated any prior aptitude for the job, and you are rewarding them for things other than doing the job?"

Thanks, but I'll pass on the wonderful privilege of training them!

Here's a good test for the timing of training: If the training was entirely optional and elective, and only available in a remote village accessible only by a mule, but your people still came to the training because they were saying to themselves, "I have got to learn this—it's going to be critical for my future," then, and only then, will you know you have timed your training well. Anything less than that, and you are doing the training too soon.

THE KEYNOTE SPEECH

Most of the calls I receive about speaking at in-house company events are from companies that want a speech that is entertaining, informative, stimulating, or motivating. What they don't seem to want is anything that specifically addresses the way they run their firms or the real-world changes they are trying to make.

For example, I recently received an inquiry asking me to convey to the audience the importance of living up to the organization's "sacred values" (including the need for collaboration). They wanted me to be inspiring.

However, when I asked if I could poll the audience as to how well the organization was currently performing on collaboration and what the current barriers to collaboration were, the organizers were terrified at the potential for disruption. I was not hired for that speech.

Very frequently, the person who calls me to discuss a speech or a training course is a conference planner or someone in administration—someone who is often the least empowered to engage in a discussion about how to bring about the changes that management desires.

The planner's role is frequently unenviable. Such people are often given an impossible task: put on a development program that will change things around here, but leave management out of it!

The connection between management and the potential speaker can be even more remote. For a few months, I experimented with working through a speakers' bureau. I met with their agents to explain the type of work I was willing to take on. I was astonished to discover that my request was unusual for them. Most speakers and most clients operated on the principle that if the date was available then a booking was made.

Neither the client nor the speaker engaged in discussion about whether or not the speaker could advance the goals and changes that management wished to implement.

BUSINESS VERSUS MANAGEMENT

Another problem contributes to the minimal impact of much business training: the fact that it's about business!

Business, as a subject, is about things of the logical, rational, analytical mind: concepts such as "the value chain" or the numerous Ps of marketing. Even when it's analyzing and discussing people, business is often treated as an intellectual process of analysis and discussion such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, or the characteristics of great leaders. Business, at least as it is taught in our business schools and most training programs, is about understanding and knowledge.

Both of these are, of course, very important. However, managing is a skill and has nothing to do with rationality, logic, IQ, or intelligence. Whether you can manage is a simple question of whether or not you can influence individuals or organizations to accomplish something. It's about influencing people singly, in groups, or in hordes.

No amount of understanding, knowledge, or intelligence will help if you are unable to interact with people and get the response you desire. I know a lot about management from

my education. That doesn't necessarily mean I'm any good at doing it.

The same tension between knowledge and skill, and rational and emotional development exists in many other developmental areas.

Consider the topics of marketing, cross-selling, building client relationships, earning trust, and providing client service. Many firms provide training programs and other forms of development on these topics as if the key problem is one of logic, analytics, or understanding. However, the essential keys to success in winning business has little to do with rationality and everything to do with an ability to interact well with other people.

Becoming good at dealing with people is not accomplished by taking a college course in psychology, sociology, anthropology, or any other "-ology" where people sit around and intellectualize about human resources or market segmentation and never have to deal with a live human being.

The same, alas, is true of schools dedicated to the study of business. Business school faculties tend to be composed of men and women whose backgrounds, inclinations, and temperament are based in the logical and rational. They are well equipped to teach business, but not to develop skills.

If, however, we really want to help people develop skills, we must view training the way an exercise instructor would—by designing a planned set of activities that engage the right muscles and slowly build them up through the experience of doing.

Helping people develop as managers doesn't mean discussing management or leadership. It means putting people through a set of processes in which they have to experience, try out, and develop their emotional self-control and interactive styles.

As Bill Peper, a facilitator within General Motors' Standards for

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Excellence process, reports on my blog, “Businesses often use training as a surrogate for the hard work of true skill development.”

THE HARD BUSINESS OF MAKING CHANGE

Most firms go about training entirely the wrong way. They decide what they wish their people were good at, allocate a budget to a training director, and ask that training director to come up with a good program. Training is too often used as an inexpensive way to look like you’re doing something if you’re a manager.

Bringing about change is immensely difficult and complex. Before designing any change program, it is necessary for managers to address questions in four key areas:

- **systems**—does the company actually monitor, encourage, and reward this (new) behavior?
- **attitude**—do people want to do this? Do they buy in to its importance?
- **knowledge**—do they know how to do it?
- **skills**—are they any good at implementing and executing what they know?

For example, managers could ask why people are not currently doing the things that management would prefer. Among the possibilities:

1. People view the activity as a long-term investment, and they’re too busy looking after immediate pressures (systems).
2. People haven’t been given the support, tools, or training to do the activity (systems).
3. People view the activity as discretionary; there are no consequences if they don’t do it (systems).
4. People think the activity is not “valued” by their peers; there is no perceived competitive pressure or threat in this area (attitude).
5. People don’t want to do it; they are more comfortable with technical

topics, and not comfortable with interpersonal issues (attitude).

6. People don’t understand why it’s important or don’t know how to do it (knowledge).
7. People know what to do and want to do it, they’re just not very good at it (skill).

As should be clear, training would be a “solution” for only some of these conditions. For others, it would be irrelevant. Note that skills development, as important as it is, is the last step, not the first. There is no point in offering skills training if there is no incentive for people to engage in the desired behavior.

We often underestimate the importance of the attitude questions. It is management’s job to make people want to learn things by managing the “why”—helping them understand why this is important, why it is exciting and fulfilling, and why people should sacrifice their time and attention to get involved.

If you can be convincing on the why, the training itself can often be trivially easy. When people understand and own the importance of a topic, recognizing its purpose, meaning, and value, and its role in their own careers, they often seek out the books, the videos, the online materials, and the college courses, without the company needing to provide them.

In fact, when I conduct training sessions, that’s what I focus on. I try, primarily, to get people excited about the topic, so they will leave the session actively seeking out the new learning for themselves. However, this only works if they believe that their company’s management also believes this is important, not just that I do.

THE RIGHT APPROACH

The correct approach to training is to sit top management down and ask, “What are people not doing that we want them to be doing? And do we really know why they aren’t doing it?”

Then it will be necessary to figure out a complete sequence of actions to address the important questions. What behaviors by top management need to change to convince people that the new behaviors are really required, not just encouraged? If the behavior is going to be optional, then training should also be optional. Furthermore, what measurements need to change? What has to happen before the training sessions occur to bring about the change? What has to be in place the very day they finish?

A full change program would include, at least, an examination of scorecards (new, permanent measures of performance being trained), coaching (continuous monitoring and follow-up on the new metrics), tools (in place before the training, to help implement the training), training, and rewards or recognition for achievement.

For maximum effectiveness, it is usually better to train people in their regular operating groups so that the training can be action- and decision-oriented, with collective commitments that can be monitored. Training classes that are drawn from different parts of the firm force the program to be educational only.

Large training sessions may be more efficient, in the sense that they expose a large number of people to the same set of thoughts simultaneously, but they are markedly less effective in bringing about change, and hence, are much less economic.

Training should only be scheduled on topics that can be applied immediately. Too often, companies give people tools and techniques days, weeks, months, or even years before they’ll need them. They hope the people will somehow perform them flawlessly when needed. This is wishful thinking at best.

When outsiders are used to do training, junior people continue to speculate whether their leaders are really committed and serious about

the topics being discussed. A firm's own practitioners usually are the most effective trainers. Although it is often viewed as an expensive use of high-priced practitioners' time, the greater credibility obtained when the firm's own respected people do the training results in much higher acceptance and subsequent application of the training. Outsiders should be used only to help develop train-the-trainers programs.

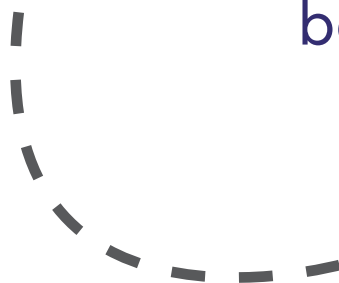
Even if the operating group leader is not conducting the training, it really helps if she attends the training as a participant. In fact, this should be mandatory. It brings an action orientation to the discussion and integrates credible commitment to the program. It doesn't matter if the group leader has been through the training many times before. Only the leader's presence can lend the sessions the seriousness they need and make the action commitments both practical and monitorable.

To ensure discipline, training programs should have mandatory prereading and pretesting. Yes, this sounds like a tough rule, especially when training senior people, but I have seen many firms that invested in highly customized programs, designed to bring about corporate consensus and change, where one-half of the participants prepared, and one-half did not. The ensuing discussion was an annoying waste of everyone's time.

The concept is simple: If it's worth doing training, it's worth doing it in a way that's going to make a difference. That means preparing and using session time wisely. If someone doesn't want to prepare, they should not be allowed in the room, no matter how senior. And if your training program doesn't warrant this degree of rigor, then you are almost certainly just dabbling and you're wasting a significant percentage of your time and money.

In 1994, I wrote an article titled "Meeting Goals," which tried to make clear that an effective meeting must

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not only have an agenda, but must have a limited set of clear goals. Many seminars, keynote speeches, and training programs misunderstand this issue. Too many companies know the agenda topics they wish to cover, but have insufficiently thought through the goals they have or considered how these goals are going to be met.

In summary, if the training has been in regular operating groups, in carefully chosen topics, right when the group can use the training, and with the group's leader in the room, they can immediately begin a discussion of how they plan to integrate the training's ideas into their practices. With the right preparation and follow-up, training can be immensely powerful.

Without all this, it can be an immensely wasted opportunity. **T+D**

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