

From Training to Development: How to Make Learning Stick

It's an open secret in the training and development community: American corporations pour billions of dollars annually into ineffective interventions designed to change people's behavior. Research shows (and everyday experience validates) that roughly 90% of people who attend a training program will be doing nothing differently six months later. Why is that? How we can structure learning and development initiatives that actually change behavior?

We're talking here about training on subjects with behavioral, social, and emotional components. Communication, performance management, negotiation, stress management, project management... stuff like that. Computer training is highly effective. So is training in things like how to maintain and repair avionics equipment (phew!). But in subjects where people have to manage their feelings, their thoughts, their time, their focus, and their interpersonal behavior, traditional classroom training accomplishes virtually nothing.

A typical training course (introducing Masha and Elwood)

Think about the typical three-day training on basic project management. A bunch of new managers sit in rows while an expert with a PowerPoint presentation takes them through Pert charts, Gantt charts, risk, communication, contingency planning, goal setting, and whatever else. Two elements a day explained, case studies, time for questions, and now let's practice with a simulation. Let's all plan in groups of five to send a banana to the moon or steal the Mona Lisa or raise the Titanic or roll out a new inkjet cartridge.

Now the typical trainee (let's call her Masha) returns to her job. Masha has a thick binder on project management. She has a project to manage – that's why she went on the course in the first place. Let's say she's overseeing the delivery of an e-commerce platform for wireless devices. She returns to three days worth of emails, voice mails, journals, newspapers, junk mails, and tasks to sort through, as well as all the work she normally does in a three-day period. Maybe her family has lived on pizza for three days. Maybe Masha doesn't have the energy even to unpack her rolling luggage, and it sits in the front hall until the end of the following weekend, or until she needs her razor.

What happens? Masha finds re-entry into her normal life so overwhelming that she barely has time to talk to all of her direct reports about the project, let alone start to create the charts and graphs she learned about and practiced when she robbed the Louvre. She knows it would be great to have the whole timeline laid out visually, but she's under such time pressure that she immediately falls back on what she knows. She writes out the project steps on the back of a napkin during lunch. She's motivated to improve, though. Masha keeps the binder on her desk, intending to get back to it and start to implement the new skills as soon as "things aren't so crazy

around here.” Three weeks later, the binder is on the bottom shelf, and she has completely forgotten everything she learned at the training.

Let’s say the training program is much more experiential, and Masha gets to bring a current project with her. She practices her new techniques, skills, behaviors, and software on the actual project. She creates the appropriate charts and graphs, fills in tables of reporting and conferring, and makes a plan for herself, including next steps, weekly meetings with key people, and a block of time every Thursday afternoon for updating all her tools.

Masha still returns to all those emails, voicemails, tasks, messy kitchen, and no razor. She’s got a head start on managing the project in the new way, but soon something unexpected happens. Maybe the client wants the wireless e-commerce platform to work on a new operating system. Maybe the chief information architect quits and retires to a radicchio farm in Capetown. Maybe the server is crippled by the “RE: DO ME” virus. A change of this magnitude is very hard to manage, even for experienced project managers. None of the contingencies presented in the training look even remotely like the one she faces. Her knowledge is not sufficient to deal with the crisis. Masha falls behind in her reporting, finds that she must choose between managing the project and practicing a new form of project management. She throws the binder into the storage closet with the empty boxes and the pair of beige pumps that nobody seems to own. She writes out the project steps on the back of a napkin during lunch.

The information-is-everything model

Why doesn’t Masha transfer the skills and behaviors from classroom to office? Why doesn’t she sustain the new behaviors that seemed so powerful and clear during the class? What can training and development professional do to help Masha and her fellow trainees?

Let’s look at why people use training at all. There are practical considerations: training is easy to implement, can be done with a limited budget, and shows that you’re doing something. Also, the training community hasn’t come up with alternatives. So training is the hammer that makes every problem look like a nail. In this case, a nail is a problem that can be solved with information. Training treats all workplace challenges as information problems. If employees only knew X, they’d do Y. For computer programmers, that may be true. But for complex behaviors, such as managing yourself and others, information is not enough. Nobody says, “If only I knew more, I would not treat my subordinates like dirt.”

So classroom training is based on an inadequate model of human learning and change. Everybody knows that. The problem is, the complicated models point to complicated interventions. There are three things wrong with complicated interventions: companies don’t like to buy them, learning and development

personnel don't like to implement them, and employees don't like to live within them.

A simple model of behavior change

We'd like to present a simple model, with four variables, that we think covers all the elements of those models without the complexity and nuance (when it comes to helping people begin the process of change, we're not big fans of nuance). It also points to a simple intervention that helps people change in accordance with how people actually learn.

People need three things in order to adopt a new behavior:

- Knowledge
- Capability
- Motivation

Knowledge

Knowledge refers to the information that Masha needs before she can manage projects differently. She needs to understand the difference between a project and a program, the elements of a Gantt chart, etc. Training is very good at transferring knowledge. The longer and more intensive the training, the more knowledge can be imparted. Online learning courses can impart virtually infinite amounts of knowledge. The problem is that people can't assimilate infinite amounts of knowledge. Masha can't possibly learn enough to know what to do in every situation, every eventuality. At some point she has to say, "I know enough to start, and that's enough for now."

Capability

Capability is the physical capacity to carry out the behavior. Here's how it's different from knowledge: Masha's instructor, Elwood, is an expert at project management. He's been teaching it for 17 years. He's certified by the Project Management Institute. And it takes him four hours to wash his car. He turns on the spigot and then goes looking for the hose. He fills the bucket and then drives to the store for soap. He rinses the doors and runs inside to find his keys so he can raise the electric windows. Most trainers can't do what they teach. Most management consultants make lousy managers. That's not to disparage them; most great managers would make lousy trainers. People get good at what they practice. It's impossible to practice project management enough in a training program to allow you to manage a real project. Masha gained some capability from the classroom, but it wasn't sufficient in new and challenging situations. She needs a chance to continue to develop her capability until she can meet those challenges.

Motivation

Motivation is the emotional urge to perform the new skill or behavior, to get the result you can't get without it. It provides the incentive to learn, to practice, to apply the behavior in challenging situations. Most people think of motivation as a rah-rah speech at the beginning of a training program or change initiative. Elwood began the class like this: "Project management is great! You'll love it! You'll accomplish great things! You'll get a huge promotion and buy a really nice business card dispenser that will make everyone jealous." That sort of motivation wears out real fast. By the time Masha is halfway through her inbox, she's forgotten why she ever went to the farshluggene training in the first place. Masha is not motivated by rah-rah; she's motivated by her desire to accomplish certain goals.

The fourth thing

Knowledge, capability, and motivation change over time. Typically they all degrade in the weeks and months following training. Unless the fourth thing is present: *ongoing support*.

Ongoing support is the key factor that allows people to grow their knowledge, capability, and motivation over time and in new, challenging situations. It turns new situations from discouraging failures into opportunities for growth and learning. Once, Peter was on the phone with his coach when an irate neighbor pounded on the apartment door and yelled something about Peter having parked in her extra space. In 20 seconds, the coach prepared him for the conversation: "Take a deep breath. What's the most important thing to you right now?" After the breath, Peter realized that it was to maintain a cordial relationship with this neighbor. "Great. What's the most important thing for her right now?" To feel heard. Peter opened the door, listened, empathized, and apologized. Without the serendipitous support, he would not have been able to draw upon his knowledge of communicating in difficult situations. And because of it, he gained competence and confidence for the next time.

Support can take many forms. In Peter's story, it was a tiny intervention at the perfect moment. Sometimes it's an email reminder, or a post-it. Sometimes it's a weekly mentoring or coaching session. Sometimes it's a screen saver, a Handspring alarm, a sermon. Support serves many functions: it can remind us what to do, give us confidence to do it, motivate us to try a new thing in the face of lifelong habits, and help us debrief after trying the new thing. It can enable us to access what knowledge, capability, and motivation we possess, and to increase all three through heightened awareness around the attempt.

So how can we provide ongoing support to learners? Isn't that really expensive? Isn't that why only the top of the organization ever receives coaching? How can we sell what we know will work, either as consultants or internally?

A sample intervention with ongoing support

Let's rework Elwood's project management course. Instead of three days, let's cut it down to three hours. We ask Elwood to boil down everything he knows about project management to 4 concrete steps. He comes up with: Planning, Design, Implementation, and Closure. Within each of these are steps and tools. He wants participants to see a Gantt chart, to become familiar with what it tracks and how to read it, but does not expect them to be able to use it themselves to manage complex projects – yet. He wants them to be able to create a basic Work Breakdown Structure and assign responsibilities and due dates based on it. He wants them to think of every project as a negotiation around the SQERT acronym: scope, quality, effort, risk, and time. He wants them to leave the three-hour session with enough knowledge and capability to begin to manage a project a little better than they would have been able to otherwise. He wants them to think of each project as a chance to learn and develop as a project manager.

So Elwood creates a 3-hour training consisting of four parts:

Describe:

- The topic: Project Management.
- Why it's important: To get things done on time, on budget, according to specifications.
- Where it's applicable: Pretty much everywhere.
- Key behaviors: Asking questions, clarifying assumptions, negotiating, contracting, following up, assessing risks, changing plans.
- Key tools: Gantt charts, Pert charts, WBS tables, Reporting Matrices.

Demonstrate:

- A sample project, a few charts.
- The cornerstone behaviors: Asking questions, negotiating.

Do:

- Practice clarifying and negotiating scope of participants' actual projects
- Brainstorm questions, role-play negotiations.

De Plan (sorry about that):

- Participants create their own action plans, with coaches wandering around and offering help: When and where will they have the opportunity to implement the new methodology? What situation in the next week can they try the new behaviors? What results are they looking for? What obstacles do they expect? What contingency plans can they create? Visualize and plan for change.
- Discuss Plans in small groups: Give and get feedback on the plans. Ask challenging questions, offer and receive support. Mentally prepare.

Next, Elwood creates the follow-up plan. As we have seen, no training program will change behavior without ongoing support. He schedules weekly or fortnightly sessions. The nature of the sessions can vary, depending on expertise, cost, time, and the culture of the company and the particular employees. Some options include individual or group coaching, facilitated learning groups, conference calls, learning lunches, and many others. They continue for 6-12 weeks.

These sessions are based on coaching principles. They focus on what worked, what didn't, what were the obstacles, what are the options for next time, what will be done for the next week, etc. Experienced coaches will quickly identify key success factors and efficiently focus trainees on the behaviors that will get the highest and most immediate ROI.

Back to Masha

Let's see what happens as Masha goes through the new training regimen. She works all day Monday on the wireless e-commerce project. She is overwhelmed by the number of variables and the number of people she has to keep track of. On Tuesday, she spends the morning in Elwood's 3-hour project management class. She gets a basic overview of some tools, and immediately sees one or two things that can help her right now. In the planning phase, she decides to negotiate SQERT with the software engineer, the client relationship manager, and the purchasing manager. She also decides to put the whole project on a Gantt chart so she can set reasonable deadlines and benchmark progress against them. Kirstin, a fellow participant challenges her about putting the whole thing on a Gantt chart. She wonders if that isn't too ambitious. Masha agrees, and with the help of a coach, decides to create a Gantt chart that consists only of major milestones. She'll fill in the details in the coming weeks.

Masha returns to her desk at 1 pm, quickly disposes of the emails and voicemails that have accumulated during the morning, and sets to work. She arranges meetings with her three key people, and explains to each of them that she will be trying out a project management tool she has just learned. She also makes a list of all the things that have to happen for the project to be completed, and puts them in chronological order. When she meets with the software engineer, on Thursday, she will ask him to estimate a timeline for his deliverables.

On Thursday morning, Masha calls Kirstin to go over SQERT in preparation for the first meeting. Kirstin spends 15 minutes helping Masha fill in the specific elements. Kirstin is glad to do it. She has her first SQERT meeting on Friday, and asks Masha to coach her as well.

Masha meets with Rik, the software engineer, at 11:00 am. The meeting goes fairly well. Rik sees the value in creating the agreements that will determine what gets done, and he's impressed that Masha has admitted that she is a novice at the SQERT tool. At the end of the meeting, she asks Rik how it went, and what she might improve upon for their next meeting. He says that they might spend more time talking about what the IT people will need, and how Masha can help them get those resources. She thanks him for the feedback.

The following Tuesday, Masha meets for one hour with her planning group from the training, along with the coach who facilitated it. They share stories of using the new skills during the previous week. The coach focuses them on their actual

behaviors, the results, and other options they might have chosen. They offer help and advice to each other. Masha's story of meeting with Rik helps Malaika prepare for her meeting with the guy who runs the porcelain insect division. Everyone leaves the conversation knowing what they are going to try this coming week.

As the weeks go by, participants need more and more nuance in their application of project management. They need more complicated tools; more subtle negotiating skills. Had Elwood presented these on Day 3 of the training, everyone would have been confused and frustrated. Now, as participants need these things, they are in a position to absorb and apply them.

Four advantages over traditional classroom training

First, the learning sticks. People absorb and apply the learning, because they need it to perform the task at hand. They get the basics up front, and then continue their education on an as-needed, Just-in-Time basis.

Second, people don't waste their time sitting in endless classes. The bulk of their time is spent solving their own problems and completing their own work, not participating in canned exercises.

Third, the training impacts the organization immediately. No more pouring training budgets down a black hole, relying on smile sheets to justify the expenditures.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, the collaborative, coaching approach to learning encourages a learning culture within the entire organization. Colleagues support each other's development. It's an ideal Knowledge Management scenario: anyone's experience becomes everyone's learning. The process of learning reinforces the notion that it's OK to not be an expert. Admitting inexperience and asking others for help replaces "fake it 'til you make it."

Now, if we could only figure out who owns those beige pumps in the storage closet.

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