

## Lessons Learned

***The key to effective training isn't necessarily what happens in the classroom. It's what you do afterward.***

By HARRY J. MARTIN

Teaching employees new skills is one thing. Getting them to apply what they have learned is quite another.

With some studies suggesting that just 10% to 40% of training is ever used on the job, it is clear that a big chunk of the tens of billions of dollars organizations spend annually on staff development is going down the drain.

Chalk some of it up to human nature: Training involves change, and change creates anxiety that people seek to avoid. In other cases, old habits and workplace pressures can break down even the strongest resolve to use newly acquired skills and knowledge.

So, if organizations want their training-and-development programs to yield better results, they need to create a workplace environment that actively encourages people to change. The key to doing that: Make sure that support doesn't end when workers walk out the training-room door. Simple activities such as having trainees write down how they plan to use new skills or knowledge on the job, or having them discuss their progress with peers and supervisors can significantly increase the amount of learning that is transferred to the workplace.

### *Training Rx*

- **The Situation:** A big chunk of the money spent on corporate training and development is likely going to waste.
- **The Problem:** Anxiety and old habits often keep trainees from using new skills and knowledge on the job.
- **The Fix:** Extend training beyond the classroom. Follow-up activities such as peer meetings and performance assessments can help inspire trainees to change.

Based on the experiences of a large Midwestern manufacturer and an industrial supplier, follow-up doesn't have to be expensive to be effective. Both companies said their training programs and follow-up activities -- which were aimed at workers whose job duties were changing -- led to improved productivity, cost savings, higher morale and better communication between trainees and their bosses. One of the companies even attributed a decline in union grievances to its training activities, saying the employees who participated in the program became better managers.

Here is a look at follow-up techniques my team found to be most effective after reviewing these two cases:

### ***Putting It on Paper***

When employees are asked to write an action plan detailing how they expect to use what they learned in training, something interesting occurs: Just writing it down makes it more likely to happen. Outlining what needs to be done, when, and with whom, reduces confusion, helps trainees

visualize the outcome and provides a document against which progress can be assessed.

The Midwestern manufacturer started a comprehensive training program for a group of front-line managers whose job duties were changing: Instead of supervising hourly employees, the managers were going to focus on developing and managing projects aimed at reducing costs and improving quality. The managers were asked to develop personal action plans for each of the main content areas of the training program. They didn't have to submit the action plans to anyone, but they were asked to report informally about their efforts in meetings with supervisors, fellow trainees and members of the human-resources department.

Many of the trainees initiated projects as a result of the training program and action planning that resulted in substantial cost reductions in some divisions. The company's top executives said they were surprised and impressed by the number of projects that were initiated and completed during that time.

The industrial supplier had a similar experience. As part of a reorganization of its primary manufacturing facility into five units, the company began implementing more team-based decision making and problem solving. That meant a change in duties for some production managers, who attended a series of training sessions designed to assist them in their new role.

Following each training meeting, participants had to develop a personal action plan that consisted of writing a response to the following five questions: What will you do to implement a concept from today's session? When will you do this? What results do you expect and how will they be measured? When do you expect to see these results? What assistance or support will you need to implement your plan?

## Measuring Results

There will be follow-up. That's the idea behind another effective post-training activity: the performance assessment. When employees know that they are going to be observed and given feedback on their performance, the motivation to use newly learned skills and knowledge increases.

Assessment usually measures specific behaviors targeted by the training. For example, if a training

program seeks to improve a person's ability to conduct meetings, one could ask meeting participants to evaluate how well the trainee does along a variety of measures, such as developing a proper agenda or keeping the meeting on track. Another approach would be to estimate cost savings that result from improved use of meeting time.

The Midwestern manufacturer used this technique on the 237 managers who participated in its training program. The managers' supervisors rated them before they went through training and then six weeks and three months afterward. They were rated on skills addressed by the training, such as goal setting, leadership style, listening skills, team building and written communication.

A significant improvement in performance was reported three months following the training.

The industrial supplier took a different tack. Instead of observing and rating trainees individually, it measured improvements in productivity that likely resulted from changes in their behavior -- things like lost days due to accidents, return on sales and scrap rates. Four out of five manufacturing units exceeded their productivity targets for the year, while one met its targets, suggesting that the new unit coordinators were applying at least some of what they had learned.

## Help From Peers

Sometimes a little help from friends can inspire trainees to give new skills a try. That's the thinking behind peer meetings -- when trainees get together to discuss how they are applying the skills and information from training and what effect their efforts are having on the organization's operations.

To provide trainees with support and motivational encouragement, the Midwestern manufacturer scheduled a series of hour-long peer meetings with each training group

### For Further Reading

See these related articles from MIT Sloan Management Review.

- **Intellectual Capital = Competence x Commitment**

By Dave Ulrich (Winter 1998)

As the need for intellectual capital increases, companies must find ways to ensure that it develops and grows.

<http://sloanreview.mit.edu/smr/issue/1998/winter/2/>

- **Can You Measure Leadership?**

By Robert Gandossy and Robin Guarnieri (Fall 2008)

It's simply not enough to put a leadership training program in place or hold an annual talent review.

<http://sloanreview.mit.edu/smr/issue/2008/fall/16/>

- **Crucibles of Leadership Development**

By Robert J. Thomas (Spring 2008)

Despite the general understanding that leaders learn from experience, only a few organizations have truly taken it to heart by putting programs into place specifically to take advantage of experiential learning.

<http://sloanreview.mit.edu/smr/issue/2008/spring/08/>

- **What's Wrong With Management Practices in Silicon Valley? A Lot**

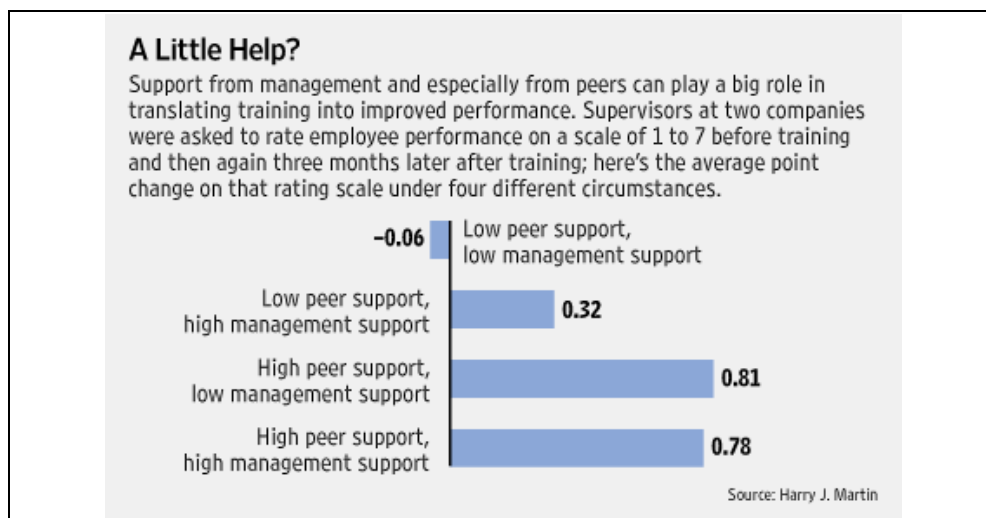
By Jeffrey Pfeffer (Spring 2001)

Although Silicon Valley is good at generating new technologies quickly, it has been much less successful in building sustainable organizations or in using sound management practices, including the way it handles its employees.

<http://sloanreview.mit.edu/smr/issue/2001/spring/10/>

between two and 12 weeks following their training session. While not every trainee had a lot to say initially, many did, and their success and enthusiasm eventually encouraged even the most skeptical member to give the new skills a try.

Peer meetings were found to be especially helpful to trainees working in divisions where management support for training was deemed weak. An analysis of performance data showed that the more peer meetings those trainees attended, the more learning they transferred to the workplace -- even if they lacked support from their division manager.



## ***Supportive Superiors***

Speaking of management support, an actively involved and supportive boss greatly increases the odds that employees will apply what they learned in training. By assuming the role of coach or mentor, the boss can communicate expectations to trainees, keep them focused, provide encouragement and help eliminate roadblocks to success.

Engaging the boss in this process involves creating the opportunity for the supervisor and the trainee to meet.

Both the Midwestern manufacturer and the industrial supplier required trainees and their immediate supervisors to meet to review and discuss the trainees' action plans. The meetings were designed to provide motivation and support for the trainees and to encourage supervisors to take an active role in helping their subordinates meet their goals.

The industrial supplier took it a step further. Since most of its trainees were reporting to a different manager following the reorganization, it wanted to nip communication problems in the bud. It asked trainees and their bosses to prepare confidential memos to each other that described what the other person "should do or do more of" or "do less or stop doing" to improve learning transfer. The trainees and their bosses exchanged these memos and then met privately to discuss them and agree on actions to be taken by each party.

Executives informally monitored the process to ensure that all parties treated the discussions in a constructive fashion.

## ***Access to Experts***

Sometimes trainees need additional information before they can finalize and deploy an action plan. Companies can help by providing technical support -- things like reference materials, additional data on training topics, or access to experts from inside or outside the company who can answer questions. Research shows that employees who participate in follow-up meetings with instructors after training are more likely to apply new skills and knowledge on the job.

The industrial supplier had each of its trainees meet monthly with a project director to discuss training transfer. The meetings typically lasted an hour and focused on the trainee's action plan for that month's training session. The project director helped them formulate the plan and spot potential problems. Occasionally, the project manager gave the trainees additional reading or resource material.

Based on these case studies, I believe it is important for organizations to make learning transfer an important part of any training-and-development effort. If it weren't for the action planning, peer meetings and other follow-up activities, it is unlikely either company's training program would have been as effective as it was.

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