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Lessons Learned: 20 Keys to Successful Training and Performance Improvement

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I believe that the field of training and performance improvement has not advanced as much as it should have, because there is still a lot of confusion about learning and how to make it happen—especially in organizational settings—and the relationship between learning and performance. There are many fads and new technologies that have distracted us from the basic truths of effective learning. In this article, I will share 20 of the insights I've acquired over the past 30 years in the training and performance-improvement field. Many readers might think, as you read this, that these principles are not exactly "rocket science," but sometimes the greatest value lies in the most basic truths.

1. ***Skill learning requires significant practice.*** Anyone who has studied learning knows that real skill learning requires a lot more practice and feedback than is typically provided. Then, why is it that so much training is done at such a superficial level? Superficial learning will almost always result in poor performance. Part of the problem is the failure to realize that most adult learning requires unlearning, as well as learning. Adults already have a repertoire of existing skills that will be their "performance default settings"—until they are changed. Because of this, very few people will use an uncomfortable new skill as long as a comfortable old skill is available. As Gale (1994, p. 356) laments concerning quality training, "In too many organizations, people attend classes, listen to speeches, learn to talk in slogans, then go back and do exactly what they had been previously doing." One of the most promising areas of skill development is the concept of "fluency." Linguists and athletes have known about this for a long time—being able to perform at a level of real competence requires an *over-learning* that builds competence that can be demonstrated consistently in real-time, not just a one-time demonstration under artificial conditions.

2. ***Don't confuse knowledge with skills.*** Trainers continue to fail to make the important differentiation between knowledge and skill. Knowledge requires skill. Skill activates knowledge. Without skill, knowledge just sits there and can do nothing. As Schank (1997, p. 5) has cogently stated the problem: "Knowing the seven habits of highly effective people, and applying those habits well throughout your organization are entirely different things." How many courses in your organization are really just conveying knowledge (a.k.a., information)? This problem has been exacerbated by the emergence of the "knowledge management" (KM) fad. There is nothing wrong with KM—and some day we may learn how to manage knowledge effectively—but, in the meantime, we must realize that training is about behavior change, not content dissemination.

3. ***Make sure that employees have strong "core skills."*** Core skills are the basic skills that employees use in the same form every day. These are "survival skills" without which employees cannot do their jobs. For example, there are core customer-service skills, core selling skills, and core machine-operation skills. These skills should be the initial focus of training. These core skills should be practiced to a level of "fluency"—or "unconscious competence"—that means they should be second nature. Once this basic foundation exists (this is what they call "the fundamentals" in sports), employees can start improvising on the basics. However, without a strong core skill base, there is no foundation for success. As Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002, p. 268) explain: "More often than not, it is not a lack of new knowledge that blocks performance, but a lack of consistent, accurate implementation of knowledge that people already have."

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4. ***Competence is only the beginning of the learning process.*** Learning often begins with training; but it shouldn't stop there. Unfortunately, too often it does! Competence is just the price of admission. Employees cannot be allowed to rest on their laurels. Organizations should not be satisfied with competence, but should encourage employees to strive for higher and higher levels of competence and performance. Employees should be encouraged to (and rewarded accordingly) become mentors and thought-leaders in their fields. Furthermore, because the "half-life" of skills and knowledge is decreasing every day, once skills have been learned, these skills need to be continuously enhanced. Otherwise, they will become obsolete.

5. ***Teach them to learn.*** *Learning to learn* has become today's most critical skill. Learning is free. If employees can learn on their own, learning is more likely to happen, the cost of the learning will be greatly diminished, and your organization will be on its way to becoming a learning organization. As Wenger & Poe (1996, p. 185) put it: "Success in today's turbulent new economy is won not by those who have learned a particular skill but by those who can learn new skills quickly."

6. ***Learning out of context is doomed to failure.*** Too much training is done "out of context." It is done in an artificial setting, often with unrealistic examples and scenarios. Even if this learning is done well, it is often a daunting challenge to apply the content on the job. That is why informal, on-the-job learning is often so much more effective than formal, off-the-job instruction. On-the-job learning significantly reduces the need for transfer. As Charles Handy (1992, p. 212) has said: "We learn about life from life and learn about work through working, mixed with a judicious amount of coaching, teaching, and reflection." On-the-job learning is also the best way to bridge what Pfeffer & Sutton (2000) call "the knowing-doing gap."

7. ***Learning should be team-oriented.*** Another critical contextual issue is team learning. In today's organizations, most work is team-oriented, and learning should be so as well. Brinkerhoff and Gill (1994, p. 147) have explained: "The mindset and behaviors that contribute to good teamwork are not in the repertoire of most employees. Collaborating with someone outside one's discipline is a foreign notion to many professionals." This needs to change. However, I am not advocating isolated "teaming" courses or teaching generic teaming skills. I am advocating providing more substantive training *in the context of teamwork*, teaching people in intact teams, and giving everyone the teaming methodologies they need to work together effectively. Furthermore, teamwork must be reinforced through expectations, measurement, and rewards. Dumping teamwork courses at people won't do anything. What is needed is a systemic approach.

8. ***The purpose of training should be to enable business results.*** Although individual and team development might be important, they should be subordinated to achieving organizational results. Most trainers want to "add value" to their organizations, but few trainers ever systematically determine what kind of value they should add to the organization. One thing is for sure: If you were to ask managers in your organization if they wanted training to "make trainees happy" or "to increase organizational effectiveness," you already know which one they would choose. But it is also important to realize that on-the-job performance is not "the bottom line"—business results are. It is important to ensure that learning, performance, and results are clearly linked. This was the subject of a previous article (Spitzer, 1999) and monograph (Spitzer & Conway, 2002). Remember that the next time you design a learning intervention. The bottom line here is that "learning people" simply must think and act more like "business people."

9. ***Effective training is never an event.*** It makes me cringe when I hear people talk about training "events' or "activities." Worse still, as Brinkerhoff and Apking (2001, p. 214) explain: "In most organizations, the training function is budgeted and monitored according to the amount of activity it generates." Not only is activity not a good measure of training effectiveness, it is the major generator of cost. Furthermore, effective training should be a process. Thor (1994, p. 8) has indicted the quality movement for the same distorted focus: "Quality award representatives want to know what percentage of time or cost is spend in training, without regard to appropriateness of the training subject and/or its timing."

10. ***Interpersonal and conceptual skills are as important as technical skills.*** We should stop using the term "soft skills," which appears to derogate them to a position beneath "hard skills." Instead, we should refer to interpersonal and conceptual skills as "common skills." In today's organizations, communication, teamwork, decision-making, problem solving, etc., are no longer nice-to-have capabilities; they are essential to individual, team, and organizational success. The mistake that organizations make is that they don't teach these skills widely enough, and they don't teach common methodologies and vocabulary. When everybody is using different tools, it is much more difficult to collaborate. Furthermore, as Brinkerhoff and Apking (2001) explain, these skills can be "hardened" by providing a specific, job-related context for using them, as opposed to teaching them in a generic context.

11. ***Training tends to reinforce the status quo.*** Too much training tends to be *replicative*, rather than *adaptive* or *generative*. Peter Senge has talked about the importance of "generative" (or creative) behaviors in learning organizations. In fact, best-practice today may be worst-practice tomorrow! We tend to teach and

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reinforce "good behavior." Too much training is focused on giving people "the one correct answer," "the corporate way," or "the party line." We know that it today's business world, there is rarely a standard way—at least not one that will remain that way for very long. Employees must be agile and able to take initiatives. Miller (1984, p. 196) has lamented about "corporations spending huge sums each year to train managers to *behave well*. Most of this money is wasted." Why? Because good behavior is not what organizations should be encouraging. They should be building creative behavior and developing people who can take initiatives. Because business is changing rapidly, so must people's skills and their ability to adapt.

12. ***Timing is crucial to effective training.*** Train *just in time*, not *just in case*. Organizations often teach skills and knowledge at the wrong time. They expect employees to be able to store this learning for future use. Skills that aren't used are very likely to be lost. This results in enormous waste of training time and expense. Worse yet, unused knowledge and skill can actually be counterproductive and interfere with usable knowledge and skill. Unused knowledge can clutter employee's memories and cause information overload. Unused learning can also interfere with performance and confuse employees. That is why unused learning is often worse than no learning at all. Its return on investment can actually be negative!

13. ***Focus training on the most critical priorities.*** Leverage—not quantity—is the key to training content selection. Many companies have enormous lists of skills and competencies that employees should learn. Despite the popular term, "corporate universities," businesses should not be educational institutions, unless they are selling education. It is crucial to prioritize skills. One way I recommend prioritizing skill is to determine which skills are most crucial for obtaining competitive advantage. These high-leverage, competitive-advantage enhancing skills should be the focus of any corporate curriculum. In this issue, Paul Kearns discusses his 3 Box learning needs. Whatever you do, make sure you have a clear sense of priority; otherwise, you will find that the urgent will take priority over the important, and you will be left with training that has no real impact.

14. ***Organizational learning cannot be sustained without management reinforcement.*** As Miller (1984, p. 123) has observed: "What happens after the training does more to determine the success...than what happens before or during the training itself." In this regard, never overlook the importance of first-line management for the reinforcement of training. One of the biggest mistakes that organizations make is to implement training without the active involvement of first-line management. Because of the effort required to use new skills, the support and reinforcement of employees' supervisors is critical. In one instance, a company wasted untold millions of dollars implementing sales training that was not reinforced by managers. The new skills were not used in droves! Perhaps more devastating than the loss of money was the impact on morale. High-impact training programs actually involve change management of a high order.

15. ***Don't create a training bureaucracy.*** The purpose of training is to facilitate learning. Unfortunately, too many companies do build "training bureaucracies" (such as large training departments and corporate universities) that too often exist to perpetuate themselves. Training has a high cost associated with it. In contrast, *learning is free!* Therefore, the motto of our field should be: Minimize training; maximize learning.

16. ***Design and delivery is the least important aspects of training.*** I hope that you are coming away from this article realizing that the identification of the most critical skills and making sure the skills are used on the job are the most important training tasks. Design and development, while important, are generic services that can be obtained anywhere. Smart organizations are realizing the value of outsourcing all non-core training activities. For example, a lot of companies are realizing that manufacturing is a generic activity that contract manufacturers can do better and cheaper. I believe that the same is true of instructional design and development. I predict that smart learning organizations of the future will be outsourcing instructional design, development, and delivery, while keeping learning strategy, performance management, and learning measurement in-house.

17. ***Training must be systemic.*** Learning doesn't necessarily result in performance improvement. In fact, it almost never does—at least not by itself. Performance improvement has many contributory causes. Training is usually aimed at symptoms, not the system. Development of training partnerships (such as with line management) within your organization is critical to success. Brinkerhoff and Gill (1994) have called this "the learning alliance." Without such alliances, learning and performance improvement are unlikely to be successful. Furthermore, learning cannot succeed when there are serious systemic problems in the organization or work unit. As Scholtes (1998, p. 392) has said: "All the teamed-up, accountable, empowered, incentivized, motivated, and paid-for-performance people you can muster cannot compensate for a dysfunctional system." To Scholtes' list, I would add "trained." Training cannot overcome serious constraints in the performance system.

18. ***Measurement is crucial to drive the right kind of learning.*** We are all familiar with the principle: "What you measure is what you get." Unfortunately, today, a lot of learning measurement is driving the wrong kind of learning outcomes. While almost everyone in the training profession would agree that the

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focus of training should be on improving business results, it should be disconcerting to virtually everyone that only 4.3% of all training is evaluated for organizational impact, while 88.9% is evaluated by "happiness indexes" (ASTD, 1995). With only a slight degree of exaggeration, Rutgers University professor Cary Cherniss concluded: "American industry is spending billions and billions of dollars on training programs and doing no evaluation of their effectiveness" (Armour, 1998).

19. ***Effectiveness is the key to e-Learning success.*** Unfortunately, too much of e-Learning focuses on efficiency. There is so much emphasis on the cost-avoidance benefits of e-Learning that we are likely placing efficiency above effectiveness. No delivery system is any better than the effectiveness of the learning that is being conveyed. If the learning cannot be used on the job to contribute to business results, it doesn't matter how inexpensive the delivery is. Furthermore, it is mind-boggling how low the quality of e-Learning programs is today. As Prensky (2001, p. 70), has stated: "It is amazing how many courses I have attended, often at the largest and most progressive companies in many industries, where the training consisted of showing and reading every bullet point on slides...The online version of this exact same approach is found in almost every course available on the Internet." The wider and less expensive dissemination of bad instruction is still bad instruction!

20. ***Caveat Emptor.*** There is a lot of *snake oil* being sold today in the training marketplace. Remember the message that permeates this article, that the targeting of training at the right needs and the follow-up is more important than the specific instruction itself. I keep remembering about how many skills I have learned from colleagues who were not trainers or even from books and job aids—when I had a high enough level of just-in-time motivation. In evaluating instructional quality, "you can't tell a book by its cover." As Brinkerhoff & Apking (2001, p. 109) warn: "Don't be dazzled and fooled by the glitz and glimmer of the packaging. Good instruction is not defined by the production quality of its wrapper." The aggressive marketing of training can distract from what is really important.

Conclusion

As I said at the beginning of this article, the observations and principles presented here aren't exactly "rocket science," but they are highly significant and valuable. I am sure that even the most experienced reader can benefit from these insights. Believe me, they represent a lot of years of experience and hard (and often painful) experience. However, you don't have to believe *me*. I am sure that most experienced trainers would agree with most of what has been said. I have also tried to support my observations with citations from the work of other knowledgeable experts. With that said, what bothers me most in training and performance-improvement today is that so many people are being led astray by the "cult of the delivery system." □

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