WHY TRAINING DOESN'T WORK

By Alan Cay Culler

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Training is on the tip of our national tongue right now. And that's dangerous because we could be on the verge of spending a lot of money on something that doesn't work.

Depending on whose estimate you believe, corporate America currently spends between $30 and $45 billion a year educating its employees. I believe that at least one third of that money, $10 - $15 billion, is wasted, like pushing stacks of $100 bills through a paper shredder.

I base this estimate of training waste on the frequency with which I observe these and other phenomena symptomatic of training that doesn't work:

- A corporation enters a downturn and instantly cancels all training.

- The "office Neanderthal" is sent to interpersonal skills training and no one notices any difference - except that he seems angrier.

- Another co-worker returns from the same seminar and "is very nice" - for about a week.

- A manager berates her people because "nothing is getting done around here" and sends her entire department to a time management course. A month later the group is still behind schedule.

- A group of supervisors in a training session repeatedly asks, "Why don't you train *my boss*?"

- The training department is the lowest paid staff group in the company.

- A senior salesperson argues with a sales trainer: "Look, it's fine for <u>you</u> to be pushing all this teamwork stuff, but I earn my money on commission. I don't get orders, <u>I don't eat."</u>

The list could go on. In the view of some line managers, training will solve all problems. In the view of others, it <u>never</u> works. I figure $10 - $15 billion is thrown away. Shred, shred, shred.

Why might a training program fail? There are many reasons:

- The training program might be poorly designed.

- The wrong methodologies might be used - too much lecture, for example.

- The instructor might not be competent.

- The facilities might be inadequate.

- The materials might be confusing.

Learning is a complex process. In order for it to occur in a training program, many conditions are necessary. Good design, correct methodology, and excellent instruction, facilities, and materials are all necessary conditions. However, they are not sufficient to make training work. I believe that when training doesn't work, it most often doesn't work for these two reasons:

- **The "Need to Learn" is absent or unclear.** Participants don't understand the reason to learn new knowledge or skills and so have at best a lukewarm desire to learn, and/or

- **The training is not integrated into the organization.** A British training manager once cynically confided to me, "Our job is purification. We get the toxic fish, purify them, and them put them back into the polluted pond." Without a link to strategy, structure, culture, systems, or management, the training is not reinforced at best and incongruent at worst.

All too often line managers don't really understand training and are content to "leave it to the experts." Paradoxically, the training professional is often responsible only for the *process* of training (design, development, and delivery) and is therefore hampered from addressing the true causes of training failure and waste.

The clear establishment of the need to learn and the integration of training with the rest of the organization could be either a line or staff function. Unfortunately, it is frequently lost in the white space in the organization chart. Shred, shred, shred.

WHY THE NEED TO LEARN IS ABSENT OR UNCLEAR

1. **Adults choose what they want to learn and they need information to make that choice.**

    > "When I think back on all the crap I learned
    > in high school
    > It's a wonder I can think at all...."
    >
    > Paul Simon, *Kodachrome*

    Children are educated as if they are sponges. Children have no experience base, the theory goes, and so they will simply absorb content.

    Adults, on the other hand, are problem-centered learners. If an adult <u>perceives</u> that new knowledge or skill will help solve a problem that he or she <u>wants</u> to solve, then he or she will <u>choose</u> to learn.

    The keys are **the desire to solve a problem** and the **perception** that new knowledge and skill will help. For example, the "office Neanderthal" who is sent to interpersonal skills training may not *perceive* a problem or, if he does, may not *want* to solve it. This, then, is first a counseling problem and not a problem solved by training.

    There are many ways to help adults to perceive their need for new knowledge or skill, but perhaps the best way is to simply tell them why the skills are necessary.

2. **It may not be solely a training problem.**

    Training professionals are usually schooled in analyzing performance problems and determining which parts of the problem are caused by a deficiency of knowledge or skill. They are also trained to evaluate individual or group needs compared to competency models and to write objectives for training based upon those needs.

    However, what sometimes happens is that *someone else* decides what the problem is and that the solution is training. The manager who sends her group to time management training may have a work process problem, an organization structure problem, a motivation problem, or management problem - or some combination of problems. In any case, training alone didn't work because a month later the group is still behind.

    Often, managers in corporations with extensive catalogues of "generic training" fail to thoroughly analyze the many components of a problem. It's like the cliché of the overprotective grandmother who pushes chicken soup on a sick

child. "Well, it couldn't hurt." In these environments, participants sometimes attend training on the "chicken soup" theory of education: "Well, it couldn't hurt." Such training seldom works and is not systemically linked to strategy or results and is therefore the first thing to be cut when times get tough.

It follows that the least likely training to be cut is that for which the need is abundantly clear. For example, Heinz USA recently completed basic skills and technical training of its existing workforce for its new Pittsburgh plant. To achieve a strategic advantage, the new plant was to be automated and computer controlled. This created a clear need for computer operation skills and the basic math skills to back them up. It would be difficult to imagine Heinz canceling this training because of a recession. It would be similarly unlikely for workers who needed these skills for their new jobs to be "too busy" for training.

WHY TRAINING IS NOT INTEGRATED INTO THE ORGANIZATION

1. **No one is taking the system-wide view.**

   Twenty years ago when I first began learning about management, I discovered that managers were responsible for *accountability and development,* for making sure that their people *achieved results and grew* into more challenging jobs that came from business growth. Now it seems that business growth is elusive, accountability originates in computerized cost reports, and development is the responsibility of those with Ph.Ds in industrial psychology or instructional design. Training has become the purview of staff specialists and outside consultants. Other specialists look at organization development, compensation and the reward system, and strategic planning, etc. Sometimes no one looks at the organization system as a whole.

   It is therefore possible to have sales training preaching the value of team selling while accounting moves sales people to individual commissions based upon orders volume. Likewise, supervisors can return from training and be asked, "Where'd you learn that? We don't do it that way around here!"

   For training to work, it must fit into the language and context of the organization. Ideally, training needs should be tied to desired strategic results. As important, however, newly learned skills must be supported by congruent organization structures, reward systems, and managers who talk the same language and help their people fine-tune these new skills.

2. **Integrated training is viewed as too expensive or too difficult logistically to execute.**

   I once participated in a four-year project to train four hundred managers and

senior sales people in the individual behaviors used in working in teams. The program was taught cross-functionally because it would be expensive and logistically difficult to have entire work groups close down for four days. The program was extraordinarily well received. Generally, interdepartmental teamwork improved and some individuals reported "transformational experiences." However, customer account teamwork, the key unit for company results, remained unchanged and there was no impact on sales.

The company later held two-day off site meetings for intact work units where teamwork skills were taught in the context of real customer problems. These sessions were sometimes stormy but the results were astounding. Not only did teamwork improve but all teams reported measurable sales performance increases, some as much as 50%. One could ask, of course, whether the second training would have been as effective without the common language created by the first, but it was clear that expense and logistical difficulty were less appropriate design criteria than organizational integration.

WHAT TO DO TO MAKE TRAINING WORK IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

1. **Put training into perspective.**

    Training is neither panacea nor placebo. Insist on **proper analysis** of all components of a problem whose solution *might* include new knowledge or skills.

2. **Make the need to learn abundantly clear.**

    This may require many individual and organizational actions, including but not limited to:

    --   Linking training needs to strategic objectives

    --   Linking training needs to new job specifications

    --   Encouraging an attitude of life-long learning

    --   Coaching, counseling, or otherwise providing feedback to individuals to help them *choose* to learn

3.   Take the system-wide view.

Consider training in the context of all the systems, structures, and management behaviors which will be necessary to support it. When reviewing training costs, compare total costs including "rework" if the training is inadequately designed or unsupported. Also,

--   If you are a manager, learn training technology.

--   If you are a trainer, learn the business.

--   If you are a CEO or senior executive, advocate regular rotation of managers through training jobs and place trainers in line jobs.

Robert B. Reich, our new Secretary of Labor, in his 1991 book *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism*, describes our world as "changing from high volume production to high value-added service" and this new environment as one where a "nation's assets are no longer natural resources...but its people's skills and insights."

It is probably fair to say that Mr. Reich believes that the "work of nations" is to grow peoples' skills, especially what he calls "high value symbolic analyst" skills. It is probably equally fair to project that this administration will provide funding to companies in the form of direct grants and tax incentives to grow those skills.

It is therefore imperative that business invests in training that works. We can no longer afford to push the stacks of hundreds into the shredder.

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