

Turning Interpersonal Training Into Results

The background of the entire page is a monochromatic blue. It features a large, stylized target with concentric circles. A single dart is shown in mid-air, having just struck the center bullseye. The lighting creates a sense of depth and focus on the target.

BY KERRY PATTERSON

Corporate learning is about changing people's behavior to produce desired outcomes for the organization. When it comes to transforming employees' interpersonal skills, there are some critical steps that have to be taken.

In the wonderful world of training back in the early 1980s, the field often was referred to as “organizational development,” and OD practitioners often ridiculed the idea of linking interventions to corporate results. Many of the pioneering gurus believed even talking about results was selling out. Our job was to make organizations better because it was the right thing to do. Period. Or so went the thinking.

They were wrong. We were wrong. Executives and managers are in the business of satisfying multiple stakeholders by securing results. So simply suggesting that training is an end in and of itself is both simplistic and insensitive. In the corporate world, if you don't satisfy stakeholders, you're out of business.

This being the case, learning designers have to make the following connection. You train people. Then, in addition to thinking or feeling differently, these newly trained people actually act differently. These changes in behavior lead to changes in results. Better yet, they lead to changes in the results your company is trying to improve. Anything short of this and you're merely entertaining, building teams, creating trust or doing whatever suits you. However, what you're not doing is improving key corporate results.

With this in mind, all interpersonal skills learning needs to be created in the following fashion:

Identify the key business result you're trying to improve. Never create or deliver training without aiming it at a key performance indicator. To find the correct indicator, ask yourself what you really want. Not all indicators are equal. In some industries, people hardly ever ask what they really want. For instance, with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), managers routinely aim their efforts at getting their products into the hands of the poor. They figure that the more people they hand out wheat to, the better.

Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus turned this strategy on end when he pointed out that the primary goal of many NGOs should not be to cure daily hunger pangs but to lift the poor permanently out of poverty by creating jobs that generate more than a dollar per day. Only by asking what they really wanted was Yunus able to redirect the efforts of thousands of NGOs toward the better goal of self-sufficiency and away from merely handing out resources.

So look at your key performance indicators, ask what you really want and then select from or create an indicator that measures what you value. This is the result you'll try to effect through training.

Identify the key behaviors that, if changed, will improve the result you want. Herein lies the rub: It's hard to know what people need to do differently to achieve the result they want. Hard or not, though,

trainers have to find the link or they won't know where to aim their efforts. That's how generic communication training or leadership courses often are created. Trainers are not quite sure what people need to do differently, but they figure if they get better at communicating, it can't hurt, right?

Wrong. If the actions you're teaching are not clearly linked to key results, the training is likely to take time, cost money, fail to get results and thus undermine the credibility of the training and its facilitators.

Conduct a positive deviance study. To discover the specific behaviors that directly impact the results you want to achieve, find other work groups, departments or companies that are succeeding where you are routinely failing. Discover what these successful folks do that separates them from you and the rest of the pack. This is the practice of uncovering positive deviants.

For instance, when trying to uncover why one company had a near-perfect safety record in an industry that suffered many accidents, researchers discovered that the safe company didn't have a safety program. Everyone else did. They didn't hang banners or give speeches. Everyone else did. What they did do is speak up the first moment one of the researchers stepped into a hard-hat area without a hard hat.

Several people spoke up — directly and politely. In the places that hung banners, people didn't speak up. They thought it was rude or inappropriate. They let the banners do the talking, and the banners didn't work. Find the distinct behavior of successful people — in this case, speaking up when people violate safety standards — and teach them to your trainees.

Copy others' work. Once you've identified the measure you want to improve, you'll usually find that the research that connects behavior to outcomes already exists. Scholars and practitioners have found the link between behaviors and results, and it's your job to search them out and then stand on their shoulders. Whether you conduct the research yourself or rely on others, the point is the same. Don't design training until you know the behaviors you want to change, and don't select the behaviors until you know how they affect the result you care about. Once again, if you can't link the behavior to the result, you're taking a huge risk.

Design training that affects the key behavior. Now you're to the point where you have to design training that actually affects how people behave at work. Even if you've identified the right behaviors, if you can't enable and motivate people to routinely enact the behaviors at work, training participants can't or

DID YOU KNOW?

Muhammad Yunus was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for his pioneering concept of micro-credit, which involves extending small loans to poor entrepreneurs who cannot get large loans from traditional banking institutions.

Source: Wikipedia

IN PRACTICE XP SYSTEMS TRAINS AT THE SPEED OF CHANGE

Building great products is only one way XP Systems, a provider of data processing systems for more than 250 credit unions across the United States, helps its customers. Teaching its clients how to use those products is equally important. For example, XP Systems teaches credit union tellers about its products for performing financial transactions and managing a cash drawer. Member service representatives are taught how to use XP Systems' software for opening, managing or closing an account.

The pace of change, as well as the volume of training, poses challenges and opportunities for XP Systems. For a long time, the company relied on instructor-led training to teach credit union employees how to use its software. This approach required instruction manuals that XP Systems couldn't always produce or update to match the pace of new software releases. This meant sometimes even the most up-to-date training lagged behind software releases.

That lag meant lost opportunities for training revenue and inefficient use of the system until the credit unions were trained. As a stop-gap measure, instructors would rely on their product knowledge to update classroom materials on the fly. This created extra work for busy instructors who already logged many hours on the road. It also increased the probability that training was not consistent from one class to the next.

Also, XP Systems' heavy reliance on instructor-led training resulted in a packed training schedule for its trainers. Credit union clients became frustrated if they couldn't get the training when they wanted it, and trainers often were overwhelmed. In addition, turnover among credit union employees, especially tellers, was high. Just as trainers had finished teaching tellers how to use XP Systems' software, a request would come in to train a group of newly hired tellers at the same credit union.

"For our business, we found it challenging to keep updating our training to reflect the quarterly improvements to our products, especially our software," said Bonnie Abbott, product manager for XP Systems. "An investment in a training software solution seemed the best way to meet our challenges."

In March 2007, XP Systems bought a platform of learning technologies for creating, capturing and reusing knowledge, and for tracking student performance. As XP Systems updated its software products — up to four times per year — its new learning technologies, including a learning content management system (LCMS) from OutStart, gave Abbott's team a way to keep the company's training synchronized with product development. With the LCMS, XP Systems could rapidly create online and classroom courses to mirror each product upgrade.

"The LCMS gave us software for creating or pulling in training content from any source, whether it was a class manual, video, whatever," Abbott said. "The LCMS also provided us with a central repository for storing our training. Having a storehouse of content that we could edit and reuse for different purposes helped us vastly improve the speed

with which we developed training on our products."

With the LCMS, XP Systems developed the building blocks for a course on any product. As XP Systems' software or services expanded, the LCMS gave Abbott and her team a way to easily turn any existing course into the foundation for a new one.

XP Systems' new learning technologies, including the LCMS, took the burden of updating courses off the instructors. This enabled XP Systems to develop and deliver consistent training, providing proven tools and additional training options for its credit union customers. And by producing quality training much faster, XP Systems generated additional revenue from instruction. Because of the speed associated with the LCMS for developing training of all kinds, the company rolled out online and classroom training months earlier than before.

"Without an LCMS, we would have had to pick through hours and hours of courses whenever a statistic set of directions or graphic changed," Abbott said. "The LCMS is invaluable for training professionals because it allows them to find and reuse bits and pieces, or a whole mass of content, for many different purposes."

Along with the LCMS software, Abbott's team also bought a learning management system for registering employees for training and tracking performance. The LMS played a support role to the LCMS by synchronizing training with a student's Outlook calendar and delivering an online class when needed. The LMS also provided reporting and tracking capabilities.

Working together, the LCMS and LMS also deliver XP Systems' customers a variety of online training to choose from. This means XP Systems' instructors have more manageable workloads. Since implementing the platform of learning technologies, XP Systems has seen credit union customers tap these learning tools to train newly hired tellers in the use of XP2, the company's flagship data-handling product. In the past, an instructor-led course might have taken three days. But the same course now lasts three hours.

"After three hours, there is still additional training that a new-hire would need on our product," Abbott said. "But we've made it possible for a new-hire to significantly reduce the learning curve, walk out to the teller line and use our product far sooner."

"We can now develop and deliver online training simulations for our product very quickly," Abbott explained. "Our simulations show the XP2 software as part of a demo with voiceover. Basically, the LCMS makes it possible to show in a very precise way how someone would use our product to transact credit union business. Our credit union customers say they have observed that retention of tellers has gone up, too. And tellers say training simulations with our product better prepare them to enter the teller line." **CLO**

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won't do what's required, and your results will remain unchanged. While there are dozens of places to start when trying to motivate and enable new behaviors, here are several principles you should keep in mind if you want to see people behave differently once the training is completed:

- 1. Never confuse behaviors with outcomes.** Many training courses offer the following type of advice: "When first bringing up a problem with someone, establish a good relationship." This advice sounds good, but upon further reflection, it explains what to achieve, not what to do. Participants are being told to do something that leads to a good relationship. The outcome is clear; the action is unknown. On the other hand, behavioral advice informs action. It is recognizable and replicable. Trainers often offer outcome advice because they haven't followed the previous steps and don't know the requisite behaviors.
- 2. Focus on both motivation and ability.** Most training programs spend far too much time convincing people they ought to give up their old ways and far too little time teaching and practicing new ways. For instance, HR professionals often use thorough 360-degree survey techniques to convince people they need to change. Ironically, most participants can be motivated to change with a quick review of ineffective interpersonal techniques and why they don't work — followed by replacement behaviors. At this point, trainers should quickly move to the hows and whys of the replacement behaviors. The key is to work on ability far more than motivation.
- 3. Employ deliberate practice to improve ability.** Nobody would dream of competing in figure skating without careful coaching. You'd want to be shown what to do, given a chance to do it, be observed by professionals and then given advice on what to change and how to change it. You'd repeat this process over and over again until you got it right. The same sort of deliberate practice should be used with leadership and other interpersonal skills training. The ratio of lecture and discussion to coaching and feedback must tip toward practice and away from theoretical musings if you expect people to master complex interpersonal skills. When you know the exact behaviors required to secure results, when you can demonstrate them clearly on video or through live modeling and when people can see the link between those specific behaviors and key results, then they'll willingly practice them with feedback.
- 4. Rely on theoretical paths.** You can't tell people to follow rote steps and expect the steps to work in complex human interaction. So when teaching interpersonal scripts, build a variety of possible

responses from the other person into your theory. You have to build these contingencies into your interaction model through pathing. You also have to build in the skills to deal with each contingency. If not, once the conversation starts, it could easily follow a path trainees aren't prepared to deal with.

- 5. Identify entry conditions.** As you teach specific skills, take the time to identify when and why the skill is called for. Demonstrate the entry condition, talk about the entry condition, warn people that they'll need to watch for the entry condition and then build these conditions into the practice. For instance, when people aren't motivated, they say such things as "Who cares?" "What's the big deal?" or "I have higher priorities." These types of statements are entry conditions. Once trainees

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recognize the entry conditions, they can apply their newly learned skills to increase motivation.

- 6. Test for efficacy.** Once you've trained people on what to do and how and when to do it, the final step is to measure their ability to do what's required. Provide trainees with interpersonal tests, measure their effectiveness, give them feedback, allow them to make corrections and don't move on until people have mastered the requisite behaviors.

Looking for Results

If you've done your homework, you can turn your attention to the results you're measuring. If people can and do enact the behaviors you've taught, if the behaviors lead to results and if the results are the ones you truly want, you've designed the right training course. You haven't trained because it's something you do, because you happen to have a course catalog or because you've got a nifty room with cool gadgets. Rather, you've trained with the results in mind, and your carefully executed training initiative has helped you improve key areas. **CLO**

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