Great Training--Then What? Tips for Training Transfer

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Let’s say some folks in your organization participate in a training program. After that, what happens? Do they use what they learned back on the job? If they do, great. If they don’t, then what a colossal waste of time, money, and opportunity. Although we can’t be sure how much training transfers in general (Farrington, in press), we do know there is a lot of room for improvement (Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010; Taylor, Russ-Eft, & Taylor, 2009).

Unfortunately, there are many possible hazards that can retard or block a person’s use of new skills. Thankfully, there are also key protections training managers and instructional designers can employ to ensure that learners will use what they have learned.

Make It Relevant. Before offering training, make sure that what people will learn is important. During training, illustrate why their new skills matter to the organization and especially to the learners. They should be able to do their jobs better, faster, or more confidently.

Get the Boss on Board. If they believe their managers are supportive, people are more likely to transfer their new skills. Let managers know that their support matters, and tell them specifically what behaviors to support and how. Ideally, managers will show their support both before and after training.

Timing Is Everything. Prevent forgetting or loss of confidence by providing training just before or just as learners need their new skills. Especially, do not offer training so early that learners forget what they have learned by the time they can use it.

Form Follows Content. There are prescriptions for enhancing transfer for each type of content (for example, concepts, procedures, problem solving). Use those strategies to embed transfer support into each lesson (see Smith & Ragan, 2005). Without tailored support for transfer, learners often fail to see how they should apply what they have learned.

Discard the Chaff. When choosing content, carefully sort out and focus on the essentials. Avoid interesting fluff.

Simple, Then Complex. If you want your learners to do something exactly as learned (near transfer), provide them with only one variation: the way you want them to do it. Later, if you want them to perform in a wider range of contexts and with variations (far transfer), then do two things:

1. Ensure that they learn one correct and standard way to do something.
2. Provide a range of practice that requires adapting what they have learned in different ways.

This two-part approach will enhance far transfer.

Practice Makes the Difference. Provide enough practice (and feedback) so that learners develop fluency and confidence in their new skills. If the new way seems too difficult or awkward, many will abandon it.

Complete the Toolbox. Do people have the information, permissions, tools, equipment, and access to others (for example, coaches, experts, or team members) to employ their new skills back on the job? Learners should know what they need, and their managers should know what to provide.

Prevent Painful Peer Pressure. During the training program, proactively guard against potential negative reactions from coworkers. For example: People may scoff at the new agenda format. How can you show them that it is worth
using? Enlist managers' help to discourage negativity from peers and others.

*Create a Happy Outcome.* Encourage recognition and rewards for using the new skills. Suggest that managers tie positive outcomes to positive transfer. For example: If you use this new process, then … we'll recognize you at the quarterly meeting, it will positively affect your performance review, or your bonus will be bigger.

The tips provided in this short article are not all-inclusive, but they should help you to improve learning transfer in your organization.

What additional tips can you offer from your experience in enhancing transfer?

Jeanne is one of the 100+ presenters sharing their knowledge and expertise at THE Performance Improvement Conference 2011, April 10-13, in Orlando, Florida. If you would like to learn more, you may attend her 60-minute presentation, “Orchestrating Transfer for Complex & Challenging Situations.”

**References**


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