



Maximizing Your Return on Training Investment

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Each year, millions of dollars is invested in employee and management training in the United States. Countless hours are spent in classrooms, computer labs, e-learning, and webinars. Unfortunately, the return on investment for most training remains at less than 10%.

Employers recognize the importance of employee training in keeping their work force challenged, engaged, and demonstrating peak performance in their jobs. One of the 12 Questions of a Strong Workplace (Gallup, 1999) is "In the past year, have I had opportunities at work to learn and to grow?" As we compete in a knowledge economy, the ability to learn faster, better, and smarter directly impacts organizational success.

The road to effective training, however, is paved with good intentions. As a professional trainer for over 16 years, I believe there are three reasons why training fails to achieve its desired results:

- 1) The people most responsible for the transfer of training are not aware of their role in the process and what is necessary for success
- 2) Training is not delivered in a way that connects with employee learning styles
- 3) Training is not the answer

Let's start with training is not the answer. In too many instances, training is viewed as a "pill" or quick fix. "Let's send this employee to customer service training and everything will get better." Performance consultants advise that if performance is the issue, training may or may not be the answer. It is best to start with the desired state (what are the goals and what behaviors are necessary to accomplish these goals) and then identify current reality (what is performance to goals and what behaviors are being demonstrated today.) Next, perform a gap analysis and identify why current behaviors are different from desired behaviors. Questions to think about include: Is the employee able to do the job? Does she want to do the job? Is she being allowed to do the job? Does she know why the work is important? Many times, performance metrics, reward and recognition systems, or communication is the problem. A lack of knowledge or competency is not the issue. After I have

completed a thorough needs assessment with my clients, I often ask a question similar to this, "Let's assume that every employee who participates in this telephone skills training class learns these new skills and demonstrates them on the job. What else might be contributing to low customer satisfaction scores?" To maximize training investment, make sure training is the right solution!

Just as employees have different personalities, each person has a unique learning style. Some people need "hands-on" practical applications. Others prefer to watch and listen, taking time to reflect on how to apply the concepts in their own particular work situations. Training presentations need to connect with all learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. I have observed many classrooms where the primary teaching method is lecture. This is not the most effective learning style for most adults. In addition, most people are good at understanding a concept or principle. Being able to demonstrate that behavior in a real-life work situation requires active learning. This means that effective classrooms are participant centered and instructor led. Instructors must modify their teaching to provide exercises that appeal to each learning style. Learning has not taken place until behavior has changed!

Lastly, I believe that the people most responsible for maximizing training investment are not aware of how critical their role is in the process. Let me prove this by asking a question: Which of the following combinations of people, in the order listed, has the most impact on whether training has a positive impact on performance?

- a) Employee, Trainer, Manager
- b) Trainer, Employee, Manager
- c) Manager, Trainer, Employee

The correct answer is letter C. If the manager is not committed to the training or does not have a clear picture of desired outcomes, the training will not be effective. How many of you have attended a great training class, came back to work totally enthusiastic only to be met by a manager who says, "Well that's great, but we don't have time for that stuff here." Have you ever had a workshop canceled because your manager said, "you have more important things to do!"

A trainer must be intimately familiar with the organization she is working with and must ensure that specific training objectives are identified in terms of observable behavior back on the job. One of my favorite questions is, "What does success look like? How does it feel?" For example, in providing team

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building classes for one of my clients, we determined that a desired outcome would be having the production teams make more decisions on their own so fewer calls would be made to the production supervisor, during and after work. The metric would be number of phone calls. The class was tailored around effective team decision making with real life examples that the team encountered every day.

Employees who participate in training should go into every session with specific learning objectives defined. “It’s mandatory” and “I need to get additional CEU’s” are not valid training goals. Managers and employees should meet before the training to discuss why he is taking the session and what he hopes to gain from the experience. Then, promptly after the class, the manager should meet with him to review what was learned and how to use these new skills, attitudes or behaviors in his job. It is also important to follow up and recognize the behaviors you want to see more of while coaching those areas that need development.

Training is not quick fix. It is not a “one size fits all” approach to learning. It is not the sole responsibility of the trainer or the student. Managers must play an active role for the investment in training time and dollars to begin to payoff in a big way!