STRATEGIC REINFORCEMENT: THE VALUE OF MAKING CHANGE STICK

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Training initiatives have a valued and critically important place in today’s business environment. Organizations spend more than $50 billion on training annually, according to the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). A significant part of this $50 billion is applied to training that organizations claim is crucial to responding to the changing dynamics of their markets.

Yet these same organizations are frequently inconsistent and ineffective when it comes to reinforcements—the art of helping their employees integrate and apply their new learning on the job. The truth is, everyone believes in the value of reinforcement, but very few people do much about it. Too often, the focused efforts to reinforce the skills learned in training programs end up in the graveyard of good intentions. The reasons behind this failure are not difficult to identify:

• **Lack of time.** Managers say they are too busy to devote much time to reinforcement. Too often it’s one more “to do” on a list, and one that never gets done. The most many can manage is a cursory conversation (“How’d it go?”) once the training is completed. The unspoken message to employees is: training and reinforcement aren’t critical to the organization’s overall goals.

• **Lack of understanding.** Many people think of training as a break from work—a random event with little relationship to the business of the organization. Managers fail to recognize that training can be an occasion for all employees to reframe their current responsibilities in light of new skills and new business objectives. They also equate reinforcement with “positive reinforcement,” a term made popular by B. F. Skinner. Reinforcement for them begins and ends with a pat on the back whenever an employee demonstrates the desired behavior.

• **Lack of commitment.** Lack of commitment can take several forms: lack of commitment to reinforcement per se, to the training to be reinforced, or to the goals that require employees to learn new skills.
Lack of commitment can exist at all levels of an organization, with higher levels tending to infect the lower. For example, if an organization’s executive team has not strongly and publicly committed itself to the training, managers may not get the message about its importance, and may not take the time to endorse and introduce the training to their own employees.

It’s not surprising that managers in this situation often regard training as taking valuable time away from more immediate tasks. Although they may never say it’s a waste of time, employees pick up their attitude from comments like, “HR is sending you to training next week, but don’t think you can skip out on your regular work,” or “Take your Blackberry, so you can get messages,” or “They say you’re supposed to pick an area to work on during the training. Whatever.”

Thus “prepared,” it’s small wonder that employees fail to see the connection between what they learn during the training and their work responsibilities. Although employees may have promised during the training to apply new skills, back on the job there is nothing much to help them live up to their commitment.

Bottom line: a disappointing experience that fails to achieve results for the organization, the manager, and the individual participant. Are these training dollars well spent? Or wasted.

FOUR STEPS TO MORE EFFECTIVE REINFORCEMENT

There are four steps an organization can take if it is serious about making reinforcement pay off:

1. Provide a strategic context for training and reinforcement.
2. Tap into the power of informal workplace learning.
3. Involve the right people—before, during, and after the training.
4. Give managers the tools they need to be effective, strategic reinforcers.

Step 1. Provide a strategic context for training and reinforcement.

For reinforcement of formal training to pay off in this day and age, it must be strategic. In other words, it must not only encourage the application of skills, but also highlight the situations where employees can apply the skills in the service of a specific strategy. Finally—by underscoring the “whys” behind the training—effective reinforcement can encourage employees to take responsibility for their own learning so they can work more independently. This last component is especially critical. Change is the norm in almost all organizations, and employees must learn how to adapt to it.

The following examples illustrate the kind of big-picture context required for participants to understand why they need the skills that training will provide:

- A recently downsized manufacturer has streamlined its operations so it can do more
with less. If this strategy is to work, employees need cross-training. They also need the skills to work effectively on ad hoc cross-functional teams with people from other parts of the organization.

- A retail operation that has been losing money decides to compete by creating loyal customers rather than by offering products at the lowest price. To achieve this goal, it must train employees to be particularly skilled at serving customers—and adept at identifying opportunities where service will have the greatest positive impact.

- A hospital seeking to counteract low employee morale initiates leadership training that will help build a committed and cohesive workforce.

**Step 2. Tap into the power of informal workplace learning.**

Formal learning takes place in the classroom or in structured programs on the Internet. The content, timing, and method of instruction are determined by the organization. Informal learning, on the other hand, is driven not by the organization but by the employee—his or her choices, preferences, and intentions. It takes place as people go about their daily activities. It is predominantly unstructured, experiential, and non-institutional.

There are three types of informal learning that can be harnessed to reinforce formal training and develop individual learning strategies:

- **Coaching.** Help with a specific task or assignment. A person is often coached by his or her manager, although peers often coach each other also.

- **Mentoring.** A relationship in which one person provides formal guidance to another on longer-term, career-related issues.

- **Reflecting on experience.** Reflection ranges from individual moments to group activities in which all members think back to a work activity or experience and discuss aspects of its impact including: what they learned, how it relates to their other responsibilities, and how it will affect their behavior in the future.

Compared to formal training, informal workplace learning is much more pervasive and can be more powerful. Employees may spend 70 percent of their total training time in informal learning; if incidental learning is included (see box), this percentage can rise to 90 percent.1

Informal learning gains its power from the degree to which it reflects the way adults learn. The adult approach to learning is described by Malcolm Knowles in *Androgogy: The Adult Learner* (footnote 84, p. 28):

- As adults mature, they tend to be self-directed learners, i.e., they pursue learning they themselves have determined they need.

- Adults use their life and work experiences to validate and extend their learning.

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1 Marsick and Watkins, footnote 1990
• Adults are motivated to learn when they perceive it’s necessary to improve performance.

• Adults tend to organize their learning around solving a problem, rather than mastering a subject.

• Adults are motivated to learn less by external factors such as salary increases than by internal factors including recognition, better quality of life, and increased self-esteem.

The more an organization can tap into informal workplace learning experiences that reflect the way adults learn, the bigger the gains it can realize on the money it spends on formal training.1

Step 3. Involve the right people—before, during, and after the training.

The key players are the participants and their managers, the executive team, and often facilitators and content experts.

BEFORE THE TRAINING

People in an organization take their cue about what’s important and what isn’t from those further up the organizational ladder. For this reason, the executive team needs to actively and publicly lead any strategic training effort.

• The executive team must make it clear to the organization that the training is important, why it’s important, and their expectations concerning how everyone’s performance must change. For example, if an organization has adopted a customer-focused vision for the future, the executives need to paint a picture of what this future will look like, and how individual employees will fit in. They will sell the value of customer loyalty and the employee skills and attitudes that go into creating it. And when they see evidence of these skills and attitudes, they will praise them to the skies.

• At the very least, managers must understand the core content of the training before their employees go through it. Managers may go through the core training itself; they may attend special workshops for managers; or they may participate in face-to-face or e-learning sessions. Understanding the content of the training puts them in a better position to prepare their own employees and to set challenging expectations for their post-training performance.

• Managers need to prepare each employee for the training. Many managers start with a letter to each employee, followed by a group meeting where employees learn why the training is needed, what to expect during the training, what support will be available once the training has been completed, how their behavior should change, and how their new skills will be evaluated. In everything they do, managers need to communicate the idea that learning and growth are expected, and that training is not something that allows employees to “get out of work” for a few hours.

• If possible, managers should meet one-on-one with each employee to discuss how the training can further the individual’s own development, and to help the employee focus on those aspects of his or her work where the training will be most helpful.

• Training programs often require participants to do some “prework” before the first training session—reading, or taking a personal assessment. Participants are often asked to choose a challenging aspect of their work to

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1 Educational Development Center (Day 1998, p. 20).
which they can apply their new learning during and after the training. Managers need to take the time to help each employee make a thoughtful choice. In so doing, they will be focusing the employee on a worthwhile learning opportunity that will speed his or her development, while, at the same time, making the work of the department go more smoothly.

**DURING THE TRAINING**

- **Managers** should do whatever they can to help their employees clear the decks for the training and to protect their time while in training sessions. This could include making arrangements to help an employee handle regular work or any conflicting priorities the training might cause. It certainly includes not calling the employee out of training—or sending a message that in any way indicates that the training might not be very important.

  (Another way a manager can help is by not attending the training with his or her subordinates. For the most part, a manager’s presence intimidates the people who work for him or her.)

- Whoever is facilitating the training—line manager or training specialist—should take every opportunity to help participants relate the training to their work situations through individual planning, small- and large-group activities, and discussions.

**AFTER THE TRAINING**

Once this groundwork has been laid, focused reinforcement activities can begin immediately after the training is completed.

- The **executive team** sets the tone by taking every opportunity to highlight the new strategic direction—giving reports on progress, sharing organization-wide successes, and shining the spotlight on employees who get results from applying their new learning. The executives visibly use the processes and terminology that were central to the training.

- **Managers** meet with participants immediately after the training to debrief either individually or in groups, as appropriate. Highlights of the training experience are discussed, with special emphasis on application to the needs of the employee and the work group.

- **Employees** share action plans they created during the training, along with whatever work they may have done on a specific aspect of their jobs. Individually or in concert with their manager and/or other members of the work group, they decide how they will move forward.

- Managers set up a series of reinforcement events to encourage participants to continue to apply their new skills and deepen their understanding of the organization’s new strategic direction. These events can take the form of group discussions, one-on-one meetings, quizzes, or worksheets (see Step 4).

**Step 4. Give managers the tools they need to be effective, strategic reinforcement.**

It’s generally agreed that employees learn the most by observing the manager’s interactions with others and by becoming aware of where he or she puts the most time and effort.

It stands to reason, then, that managers are the best people to support their employees’ reinforcement efforts. Many training departments, in fact, expect managers to reinforce the skills once the training is completed.
There are some problems, however:

• Managers are busy people. They don’t always have the time to put together reinforcement activities.

• While managers are completely familiar with the challenges faced by their work groups, they may not have an in-depth knowledge of the training content.

• Nor do they necessarily know how to prepare activities that reflect the way adults like to process information.

In order to leverage a manager’s powerful influence on employee learning, he or she needs reinforcement activities that combine training content, on-the-job application opportunities, and an approach that taps into an organization’s informal learning.

Here are some examples for mentoring, coaching, and self-reflection:

**Mentoring.** Reinforcement activities based on mentoring are usually one on one between an employee and the manager. For example, an employee meets regularly with the manager to review progress in a specified area related to the training. The manager has worksheets, questions, and guidelines to help relate the employee’s progress in achieving longer-term career goals.

**Coaching.** Coaching, more task-oriented than mentoring, can be between a manager and employee or between peers. Reinforcement activities based on this type of informal learning can include the following examples:

• Employees are asked to complete a worksheet describing a recent work challenge related to their training. At a group meeting, each employee shares the challenge. Other employees offer their own experiences and suggest actions the person can take to improve the situation. Follow-up steps are decided and noted.

• A manager works with his or her employees to pair people with complementary skills and challenges. Each member of these “coaching pairs” can call upon the other for help at any time when it’s needed. The manager asks the pairs to share their experiences with the larger group.

• Employees review the steps for an interpersonal skill, which they learned in a recent training program. At a meeting, pairs of employees are given a situation where each person must use the skill in order to succeed. Afterwards the larger group highlights lessons learned.

• Employees agree to practice a set of skills and report on their successes and challenges. Colleagues offer feedback to each other.

**Self-reflection.** Adults regularly examine their experiences and feelings in order to integrate new learning, test out the validity of a point of view, and evaluate their abilities. Guided reflection—individual, group, or a combination—can be one of the most effective types of reinforcement.

**Some examples:**

• Employees are given a self-assessment of their skill or understanding related to a recent training experience. They meet with their manager to discuss areas of achievement as well as areas where they would like to improve. The same assessment can be given several weeks later, and the results compared.

• Employees are asked to identify challenges involved in applying their new learning on the job. They discuss these challenges at a meeting and identify steps to take to overcome them.

• Employees read the key content in a recent training experience—new concepts, perhaps, or the steps in a skill—and identify those
aspects which are most important in their work. They may share their thinking with other employees in the work group.

Reinforcement efforts should always include recognition and reward, tied as closely as possible to the strategic goal. For example, a government organization whose strategic goal is to make the transition from being mostly subsidized to charging its customers market prices for its services would want to increase customer loyalty. When one of their employees shows initiative and takes responsibility for resolving a customer complaint, recognition is in order.

**FOSTER LEARNING TO FOSTER CHANGE**

Reinforcement provides structured opportunities for people to practice skills by applying them to their work. The more they practice, the more they will improve their skills. Such improvement is certainly a desirable outcome, yet effective reinforcement accomplishes much more:

- It helps people realize that these skills—and the training that provided them—are important to the organization. Time spent in training is not a waste of time, or separate from the work. In fact, it is one of the best ways to achieve success on the job.

- By examining the experience of applying new learning to the job, reinforcement encourages people to become aware of what works and what doesn’t—and eventually to seek out for themselves whatever it takes to maximize their success.

- When enough people in an organization adopt this point of view, the organization can be said to have developed a “learning culture”—a powerful competitive differentiator in a world where change has become a constant.

- By providing this competitive edge, an effective program of strategic reinforcement will help ensure that the organization receives more than a fair return on its training investment.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**
