

Reinforcement: Making Great Training Pay Off

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We train managers who have often been in their industry for many years. It's not unusual to have people who have been with a particular company and even in the same position for ten, twenty, or even thirty years. If the group I'm training is more senior I'll start the session by asking that very question, 'Raise your hand if you've been in the industry for five years, ten...etc.' Then I ask; 'Why are you here in a training session? Aren't you done learning yet? Why not?' When does training end?

The answer of course is it doesn't end. The reasons participants give for being in training even with experience are the ones that keep businesses innovating, changing, and evolving. New competitors edging into your market, customer expectations rising, the need to find more cost-effective ways of doing the job, and so on are all reasons that drive the need to learn—every day. And yet, many of them, and us, still use the same approach and leadership behaviors that we have for many years; even after attending a training session.

How many times have you attended a conference or session where the presenter was terrific? You probably took lots of notes and nodded throughout the presentation. You laughed, smiled, were engaged, and thought this was the best session ever. And then you went home. Back at work you struggled to remember the key points and tried your best to implement at least one of them!

Getting someone to learn something or get insights from a training session is fairly straight forward. Getting that person to actually use what they learn after the training is far more challenging and complex. Let's take a closer look at one tool that is key to ensuring that new behaviors are used back on the job: reinforcement.

When a company has identified a skill gap or need for training, there is a substantial amount of time spent *before* any training is done analyzing who to train, how, when, and by whom or what format, (e.g., eLearning, distance learning, virtual classroom, etc.) Weeks or even months might be spent on this portion of preparation alone not to mention the amount of time for actual development of new material to be used during the training. Once those initial questions are answered about the population and training approach there's the logistical side of getting ready which might include outside facilities, travel, equipment needs, and so on. There might be a separate 'implementation plan' that needs to be worked out for national or global implementations as well as measurement criteria to assess impact. Planning and preparation for training can require a substantial amount of time and resources.

Assuming the actual training content is on target and has been developed with a credible learning design (and that's a big assumption) either internally or with help from outside training professionals you are finally ready to begin delivery of the training. The facilitation and/or delivery of training is fairly concise, almost blast-like when it finally gets to the audience.

While the 'training department' or whomever is responsible for this training has been immersed in this project for some time, the participants might be getting the experience of being 'dipped' into a torrent of information for a very short period of time. Is there a way to get them involved sooner? Using participants to help develop content does increase their personal buy-in. Unfortunately, typically that is a small percentage of the overall audience. When a company is embarking on a major initiative that requires training, it's important to remember that ***training is change***. And we all know how much participants like change. Since there will be a new expectation, a new norm for performance and/or method to performing their job, reinforcing that new norm even *before* managers come to the training is essential. Level one assessments at the end of the training give you a sense of how confident or relevant the training was. It doesn't tell you if they're going to use it.

When we're working with a client who is charged with doing a training initiative, one of the early questions we like to ask is, 'What is the role of the senior manager in developing their people?' The question almost always evinces some kind of reaction; a knowing smile, a frown, or nodding in agreement. What comes next is not always as encouraging. Many clients understand the importance of what happens back in the field and they also know that senior managers are rarely interested and/or fully equipped to reinforce what was learned. Not to mention the time to do it.

Training of any kind is just the beginning. In order to receive a full return on the investment of time, money, effort and being away from the field, it's critical to have planned follow up and reinforcement. Managers often look to their supervisor's behavior to set their own priorities. Do they really want me to use what I learned? Is it really as important as they said? Will anybody notice if I don't change to the new norm?

The role of senior manager is to ensure that what was trained actually gets used. It's the best way to maximize productivity of any training. Here is a specific follow-up strategy to reinforce any training you ever do. This is a sequenced strategy that needs to be done in order. Make sure that each step is fully explored during the discussion before moving to the next step. It will give you an opportunity to intentionally focus your senior managers' discussions with their direct reports about how to get the most out of the tools and skills they just learned. Have them use this within ten days of anyone on their team attending a training session. Your senior managers' ability to coach and strengthen the leadership of others will produce clear, measurable results.

Reinforcement Discussion Strategy©

1. Discuss the importance of strengthening (skills/tools that were trained) and the impact on business results.
 - **Tip:** This step emphasizes the need to strengthen use versus waiting until it's a problem that needs to be corrected. Look for reinforcement opportunities often.
2. Ask direct report to review any commitments made during the training for using what was presented.
 - **Tip:** Many training programs have commitments build in to the material. Start here before adding more actions.
3. Ask direct report to share results created so far with what they learned and what additional support they need from you.
 - **Tip:** The intention of providing training is to create a positive impact on the business and relationships.
4. Ask them to summarize next steps and come to agreement on what each of you will do to keep use of new skills/tools a priority.
 - **Tip:** You should hear their 'voice' here more than yours. Let them think through next steps to create more ownership.
5. Reinforce their willingness to grow and apply new learning; set date for follow up.
 - **Tip:** Much of what they may have learned is new. It will take time to make it their own. Encourage even small steps in the right direction.

The following page is a pre-meeting preparation tool. It helps any senior manager think through these steps in their own words. It's not a script, since it's only one person's voice, but it will increase the likelihood of success and maximize the productivity of the time spent reinforcing what was learned.

Directions: Answer the questions below in your own words to help accomplish each Step.

Step 1:	What will you say to discuss the importance of strengthening their skills and the impact on business results?
Possible reaction they might have?	

Step 2:	How will you ask them to review their commitments?

Step 3:	How will you ask them to share results created so far? How will you ask what additional support is needed from you?

Step 4:	How will you ask them to summarize and come to agreement on what each of you will do to keep the new training a priority.

Step 5:	What will you say to reinforce their willingness to grow and apply new learning; When will you follow up?

- What information will you review and/or bring to the discussion?

- How will the person's personal communication style affect the discussion?

Research has shown that when someone has a follow up conversation with an employee about training they recently attended, the likelihood of that training being used is increased significantly. Just the fact that they are asked about it, not even tested or required to prove competency, is enough to encourage them to begin to apply what they learned. When training sessions end the facilitator's work may be finished but the participants' work has just begun. The end of a session is the beginning of new behaviors and use of new tools and skills learned.

Think back to the last time you learned something new. Were you perfect after the first lesson? Probably not, what you had were fundamentals that required practice and attention. Who better to follow up and reinforce your efforts, as clumsy as they may feel, than your senior manager? It sends a powerful message that the expectation for change is strong and they have your back. Reinforcement not only ensures better results from more consistent use of training. It also builds trust and strengthens a critical coaching role your senior managers play every day. Reinforcement makes great training pay off again and again.