

Why (Most) Training is Useless

By David Maister

This article began as a series of posts on my blog davidmaister.com/blog/. My comments elicited quite a lot of encouraging interaction, so I am updating them here in a form accessible to a broader audience.

For much of my professional life, I have been paid to do training. It has been very well received in the sense that I have (usually) obtained high ratings, and clients not only paid their bills, but invited me back to do it again and again.

However, I now believe that the majority of business training, by me and by everyone else, is a waste of money and time, because only a microscopic fraction of training is ever put into practice and the hoped-for benefits obtained.

Unfortunately, training and other kinds of meetings and conferences are too often organized as stand-alone events, with a life of their own, disconnected from the firm's progress.

What companies don't seem to understand is that, as I shall discuss later in this article, training is a wonderful *last* step in bringing about changed organizational and personal behavior, but a pathetically useless *first* step.

Companies train people in new areas but then send them back to their operating groups, subject to the same measures and management approaches as before.

People can detect immediately a lack of alignment between what they are being trained in and how they are being managed. When they do detect it, little, if any, of what has been discussed or 'trained' ever gets implemented.

A good example of ill-conceived (and premature) training approaches is seen in the many calls I get to put on training programs to help people become better managers. I put my callers through a standard set of questions:

- Did you choose people for managerial roles because they were the type of people who could get their fulfillment and satisfaction out of helping other people shine rather than having the ego-need to shine themselves? (No!)
- Did you select them because they had a prior history of being able to give a critique to someone in such a way that the other person says: "Wow, that was really helpful, I'm glad you helped me see all that." (No!)
- Do you reward these people for how well their group has done, or do you reward them for their own personal accomplishments in generating business and serving clients? (Both, with an emphasis on their personal numbers!)

So, let's summarize, I say. You've chosen people who don't **want** to do the job, who haven't demonstrated any prior **aptitude** for the job, and you are **rewarding** them for things other than doing the job?

Thanks, but I'll pass on the wonderful privilege of training them!

A good test for the timing of training would be as follows. If the training was entirely optional and elective, and only available in a remote village accessible only by a mule, but people **still** came to the training because they were saying to themselves, "I have got to learn this – it's going to be critical for my future," then, and **ONLY** then, you will know you have timed your training well. Anything less than that, and you are doing the training too soon.

The Keynote Speech

Most of the calls I receive about speaking at in-house company events are from companies that want a speech that is entertaining, informative, stimulating, or motivating. What they **don't** seem to want is anything that specifically addresses the way they run their firms or the real-world changes they are really trying to make.

For example, I recently received an enquiry asking me to convey to the audience the importance of living up to the organization's "sacred values" (including the need for collaboration). They wanted me to be inspiring.

However, when I asked if I could take votes at the meeting as to how well everyone thought the organization was currently performing on collaboration and what the current barriers to collaboration were, the organizers were

terrified at the potential for disruption. I was not hired for that speech.

Very frequently, the person who calls me to discuss a speech or a training course is a conference planner or someone in administration – someone who is often the **least empowered** to engage in a discussion about **how** to bring about the changes that management desires.

Their role is frequently unenviable. Such people are often (perhaps even usually) given an impossible task: put on a development program that will change things around here, but leave management out of it!

The connection between management and potential speaker can be even more remote. For a few months I experimented with working through a speakers' bureau. I met with their agents to explain the type of work I was willing to take on. I was astonished to discover that this was a relatively unusual request for them – most speakers and most clients operated on the principle that if the date was available and the date was free, then a booking was made.

There was no norm, it appeared, on either the client or the speaker side, whether an extensive discussion should take place to see if the speaker could be used to further the organization's goals and fit in with other changes that management wanted to bring about.

Business versus Management

Another problem contributes to the minimal impact of much business training: the fact that it's about "business!"

"Business," as a subject, is about things of the logical, rational, analytical mind:

concepts such as ‘the value chain’ or the numerous P’s of marketing. Even when it’s analyzing and discussing people, business is often treated as an intellectual process of analysis and discussion: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the characteristics of great leaders, etc., etc. Business, at least as it is taught in our business schools and most training programs, is about *understanding* and *knowledge*.

These are, of course, both very important. However, managing is a **skill**, and (as it transpires) has nothing to do with rationality, logic, IQ, or intelligence. Whether you can manage is a simple question of whether or not you can influence individuals or organizations to accomplish something. It’s about influencing people, singly, in groups, or in hordes.

No amount of understanding, knowledge or intelligence will help if you are not able to interact with people and get the response you desire. I know a lot **about** management from my education. That doesn’t necessarily mean I’m any good at **doing** it.

The same tension between knowledge versus skill, and rational versus emotional development, exists in many other developmental areas.

Consider the topics of marketing, cross selling, building client relationships, earning trust, and providing client service. It has not been unusual for one of my clients to use all of these terms in outlining their needs for a seminar.

Yet what a mixture of varying attitudes, understanding, knowledge, and skill needs are hidden behind that collection of words!

Becoming good at dealing with people (inside or outside the organization) is not accomplished by taking a college course in psychology, sociology, anthropology, or any other “-ology” where people sit around and intellectualize about “human resources” or “market segmentation” but never have to actually deal with a real, live human being.

The same, alas, is true of schools dedicated to the study of business. Business school faculties around the world tend to be made up of men and women whose backgrounds (and inclinations and temperament) are based in things of the logical, rational mind. They are well equipped to teach business, but are not structured to develop skills.

If, however, we really want to help people develop skills, we must view “training” the way an exercise instructor would use that word – designing a planned set of activities that engage the right “muscles” and slowly build them up through the experience of doing.

To help people develop as managers doesn’t mean discussing management (or, even worse, leadership) but rather requires putting people through a set of processes where they have to experience it, try it out, and develop their emotional self-control and interactive styles.

As Bill Peper, a facilitator within General Motors’ Standards for Excellence process, reports on my blog <http://davidmaister.com/blog/37/#comment158>: “Businesses often use training as a surrogate for the hard work of true skill development.”

The Hard Business of Making Change

The truth is that most firms go about training entirely the wrong way. They decide what they **wished** their people were good at, allocate a budget to a training director and ask that training director to come up with a good program.

As Ted Harro commented on my blog <http://davidmaister.com/blog/37/#comment163>: “Training is too often used as a (personally) inexpensive way to look like you’re doing something if you’re a manager. As typically done, it requires little time and little personal change.”

Bringing about change is immensely difficult. It requires that managers address questions in four key areas:

- Systems: Does the company actually **monitor, encourage, and reward** this (new) behavior?
- Attitude: Do people **want** to do this? Do they buy in to its importance?
- Knowledge: Do they **know** how to do it?
- Skills: Are they any good at **implementing and executing** what they know?

Issues that exist at each of these levels require a different intervention. But note that skills development, as important as it is, is the last step, not the first.

There is no point putting on skills training if there is no incentive for the behavior; the people don’t believe in it and they don’t yet know exactly what it is they are supposed to be good at!

The importance of the attitude questions is often underestimated. It is management’s job to make people **want** to learn things by managing the “**why**” –

helping them understand why this is important, why it is exciting and fulfilling, why people should sacrifice their time and attention to get involved.

If you can be convincing on the **why**, the training itself can often be trivially easy. When people understand and “own” the importance of a topic, recognizing its purpose, meaning and value, and its role in their own careers, they often seek out (and find) the books, the videos, the on-line materials, and the college courses, without the company needing to make any provisions for these things.

In fact, when I do training-like sessions, that’s what I focus on – primarily trying to get people **excited** about the topic, so they will leave the session actively seeking out the new learning for themselves. However, this only works if they believe that their company’s management also believes this is important, not just that I do!

The Right Approach

The correct process in thinking about training would be to sit top management down and ask: “What are people not doing that we want them to be doing? And do we really know why they aren’t doing them?”

Then it will be necessary to figure out a complete sequence of actions to address each of these questions:

- What behaviors by top management need to change to convince people that the new behaviors are really required, not just encouraged? If the behavior is going to be optional, then so should the training be.
- What measurements need to change?

- What has to happen before the training sessions occur in order to bring about the change?
- What has to be in place the very day they finish?

A full change program would include, at least, an examination of the following:

- a) Scorecards (new, permanent measures of performance being trained)
- b) Coaching (continuous monitoring and follow-up on the new metrics)
- c) Tools (to help implement the training, in place before the training)
- d) Training
- e) Rewards and/or recognition for achievement

On my blog, David G. said <http://davidmaister.com/blog/37/#comment205>: “No manager should ever be given a training budget until they show which business metric that training will impact – they should set a goal for that impact and review performance against that goal before allocating more training budget to that manager.”

For maximum effectiveness, it is usually better to train people in their regular operating groups, so that the training can be action- and decision-oriented, with collective, “monitor-able” commitments. Training classes that are drawn from different parts of the firm force the program to be “educational” only.

Large training sessions may be more *efficient*, in the sense that they expose a large number of people to the same set of thoughts simultaneously, but they are markedly less *effective* in bringing about change, and hence, are much less economic.

Training should only be scheduled on topics that can be applied straightaway. Too often, companies give people tools and techniques days, weeks, months, or even years before they’ll need them and then hope they will somehow recall them (and perform them!) flawlessly when needed. This is wishful thinking at best.

The best training is usually done by the firm’s own practitioners. Although often seen as an expensive use of high-priced practitioners’ time, the greater credibility obtained when the firm’s own people do the training results in much higher acceptance and subsequent application of the training. Outsiders should be used only to help develop programs and “train-the-trainers.”

Too often junior people are sent off to be trained and they continue to speculate whether their seniors or leaders are really committed and serious about the topics being discussed. As previously noted, they often are not.

I was counseling one training firm, which was preparing to bid on a training job. As part of the request for information, its client company had asked the training firm: “What are you going to do to ensure that our managers apply the lessons you teach?” It may have seemed a reasonable question to the client company, but it only revealed the common abdication of responsibility that firms bring to training.

Even if the group leader is not conducting the training, it really helps if the operating group leader attends the training as a participant. In fact, it should be mandatory. This ensures an action-orientation to the discussion and credible public commitment built in to the

closing of the program (“We’re going to do this!”).

Even if the group leader has been through the training many times before, it’s good for him or her to be there, because only the leader’s presence can lend the sessions the seriousness they need and make the action commitments both practical and monitorable.

To ensure discipline, training programs should have mandatory prereading and pretesting (whereby attendees can’t participate if they don’t pass). Yes, this sounds like a tough rule, especially when training senior people, but I have seen numerous examples of firms that invested in highly customized programs, designed to bring about corporate consensus and change, where one-half of the participants prepared, and one-half did not. The ensuing discussion was a waste of everyone’s time, annoying both sides.

As Cem Kaner pointed out <http://davidmaister.com/blog/37/#comment168>: “Rather than distracting from people’s ongoing work, training should be structured to help them improve the quality or efficiency of what they are doing today.” As such, participation and preparation should not be optional.

The litany is simple: if it’s worth doing training, it’s worth doing in a way that’s going to make a difference. That means using session time wisely, and that means preparation. If someone doesn’t want to prepare, they should not be allowed in the room, no matter how senior. And if your training program doesn’t warrant this degree of rigor, then you are almost certainly dabbling and wasting a significant percentage of your time and money.

In 1994, I wrote an article entitled “Meeting Goals” <http://davidmaister.com/articles/1/35/> which tried to make clear that, to be effective, a meeting must not only have an *agenda*, but must have a limited set of clear *goals*. Many seminars, keynote speeches and training programs suffer from misunderstanding this issue. Too many companies know the agenda topics they wish to cover, but have thought through insufficiently well the goals they have, and how these goals are going to be met.

The summary is this: if the training has been in regular operating groups, in carefully chosen topics, right when the group can use the training, and with the group’s leader in the room, they can immediately begin a discussion of how they plan to integrate the training’s ideas into their practices. With the right preparation and follow-up, training can be immensely powerful.

Without all this, it can be (and usually is) an immensely wasted opportunity.



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