

Improving the return on training investment

Chaos theory would have us believe that a butterfly flapping its wings can cause a chain of events that leads to a hurricane on the other side of the world. What a shame that this “Butterfly Effect” cannot often be applied to a company’s expenditure on behavioural training where frequently large sums of money seem to result in little or no direct bottom-line benefits.

Indeed, so conditioned are we to expect this that when a course leader at an event I attended recently began by informing the group that they would only remember 20% of everything they would be told a week after the course finished, no one batted an eyelid. Yet isn’t this something that we should be angry about? Put another way, it means that 80% of the cost of the course is wasted, not to mention the cost to the business of the attendee’s time.

The fact that the training companies and management schools do not appear to be short of business suggests either that we consider these ratios acceptable or that we are not aware of viable alternatives.

I do *not* find it acceptable so I would like to propose an approach that I guarantee will improve the effectiveness of training and with it your return on investment.

First, let us give some thought to what is going wrong. Nice as it would be to blame the teachers or their material, the truth is that I have rarely attended a course where the course leader did anything less than an excellent job in delivering the course. No, the problem lies with us in that our ability to ignore and forget vastly exceeds our ability to listen, remember and apply. I believe that the following three matters are key to understanding how to change the situation.

Mindset

Our minds operate like the child’s toy where the round pegs go through round holes. North American thinker J K Galbraith once said ‘*Faced with the choice between changing one’s mind and proving there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof.*’

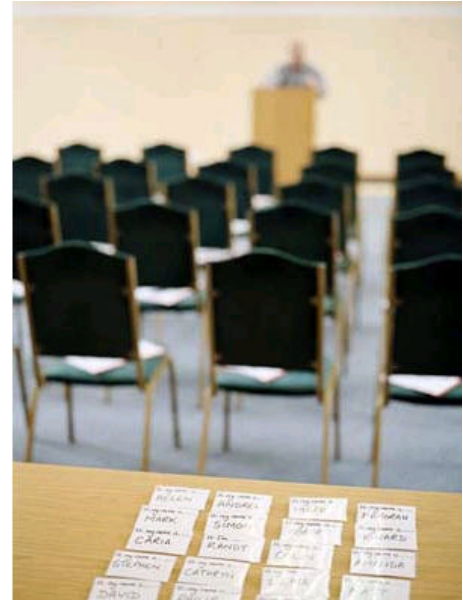
As a fun way of testing this, next time you are with a group of people, ask them to briefly look around the room and count how many red things they can see. Then ask them to close their eyes and name some of the blue objects in the room. The chances are that they will struggle to name more than a handful even though their eyes obviously saw them. What happens is that in programming our brain to look for red objects, we automatically programme the brain to reject objects of other colours.

The lesson here is that before attending a training course or workshop, we need to programme our brains to be receptive to the information that will be provided.

Relevance

Having conditioned our brain to accept information, we then need to find a use for it. If our brain cannot find a use for it, it will quickly discard it.

For example, how many times have you heard the safety talk that the cabin crew give at the start



of a flight? If you're like me you know you should listen but the fact is that if you thought that the plane was going to crash you wouldn't have got on it in the first place and even if it did crash, the chances of surviving, landing on water and then needing to know how to put on a life vest are so remote as to not bother about (*not that we recommend you to ignore the talk – Editor*).

The lesson here therefore is that the training should relate to specific business goals that the delegates are both involved with and able to influence.

Old habits die hard

Steven Covey reminds us that *all things are created twice*. For example, a building is conceived in every detail on the architect's drawing board well before the first brick is laid and in business we set out our plan and consider alternative strategies and possibilities before we act.

However, while we are used to planning our approach to significant tasks, we rarely plan the way in which we approach things. Most of us get up in the morning in neutral, and whether it turns out to be a 'good day' or a 'bad day', is generally left to circumstance. For example, how often have you had a 'bad day' because of an argument over the breakfast table or a delay to the train? Or alternatively had a 'good day' because of a phone call from a friend or a pleasant conversation with someone at the coffee machine?

If behavioural training in particular is to be effective, we need to alter our approach and consciously set out to approach things differently. As anyone who tried to quit smoking knows, habits die hard, but as anyone who has tried to do this also knows, it is a lot easier if you do it with someone else. You then have someone to share the challenge, someone to remind you of the goals and objectives and someone else to let down other than yourself if you fail.

For training to be highly effective and act as a catalyst for change, all three of these issues need to be addressed. To achieve this I recommend the following approach:

1. Objectives – The first step is to be clear about what objectives or goals the organisation is targeting. Unless you can clearly define the objective, how can you determine whether it has been achieved or not? Furthermore, as part of this process, you should define the role that your people will play, the knowledge and skills they will need and your perception of the gap that exists in their knowledge and skills.
2. Project plan – It is good to start working with a training company at this stage to decide what is possible and achievable as well as setting out timetables and budgets. Most important of all, you need to factor into your plan the capacity your organisation has or needs for key members of staff to be away from their jobs, and the space they will need once they return from training to enable them to make changes. A lot of training is wasted simply because people return to a huge backlog of work and the momentum of the training programme is completely lost.
3. Personnel – Decide who should be trained. If training is going to have a dramatic impact then the selection of people to be trained is vital. Start at the top with the most senior people as they will have the clearest view of the objectives and will be able to assist in moulding the training for subsequent staff. Try to select named individuals rather than grades, levels or functions, as the people that attend will then see that they have been chosen to be a "catalyst for change" in the organisation. This is generally more cost-effective than training everyone at a certain level and invariably far more effective.
4. Pre- and Post-course involvement – Ensure that the training company includes a feedback process that asks participant's manager, peers and subordinates for input prior to the course. In addition to the great value this feedback can offer it also alerts everyone around the attendees to the fact that they are attending a course and heightens the expectations that something will change when they return. This serves to both assist and support the individual as well as reinforcing the message that change is expected.

Following the course it is important that the attendee's manager takes time to discuss the course with the individual and agree what changes they are setting for themselves as goals.

5. Coaching – Where coaching is used as an integral component of the training and development process it can dramatically improve the chances of success. Since external coaching is expensive I generally recommend that organisations use external coaches for the more senior members of the programme and that some of those individuals then play a coaching/mentoring role for others. However, do make sure that the coaches are fully conversant with your objectives, that they are focussed on the results and that they are people who have a referenceable track record of successful coaching assignments.

In my own organisation we supplement this process by providing delegates with access to our unique knowledge-sharing network. This service gives members access to a community of highly experienced and successful people from a wide variety of backgrounds. Their role is to assist members by passing on the benefits of their knowledge and experience and, in doing so, act as another support function in helping translate classroom theory to business practice.

In my experience, applying all of these processes together can lead to a "Butterfly Effect", with the relatively modest sums of money spent on training and coaching laying foundations that will act as the catalyst for dramatic and successful step-changes in an organisations performance.

Please e-mail me if you have any comments on this article or if you would like to learn more about our approach to training and development. ➔

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