

## THE WASTE OF TRAINING

Organizations are made up of people who, like many of us, find change unappetizing and will go to great lengths to look for panaceas and band-aids, rather than grapple with real issues of human change and growth.

Bosses are happy to seek consulting solutions when they face cerebral, analytical, diagnostic challenges. They look for firms with pedigrees, fixate on theoretical models that are conceptually compelling, and leave the sordid matter of “implementation” for later.

When leaders deal with employees however—how they act and interact with each other, their skills, and what they are capable of delivering—the most common approach is to exhort them at conferences or subject them to workshops. HR often selects these workshops on “methodology” grounds. They look for consultants who are congenial to them—who haven’t the temerity to suggest that the emperor has no clothes.

Although running workshops provides a seemingly heroic demonstration of remedial action, the precise business aims they are meant to address are rarely spelled out. There also tends to be very little accountability from senior leaders to coach application when their direct reports return to them. The reason: in order to coach application credibly, leaders have to model the way to do so.

When we decouple adaptive problems from senior leadership behavior, we look to training as a sort of vaccination. Under the guise of development, large

amounts of training are expended without much by way of tracking. We may measure the popularity of a speaker with the audience or workshop effectiveness as an isolated event. They are evaluated as performances and judged based on whether or not they were stimulating at the time and place.

Training has to evolve into a form of true consulting. It should only be undertaken to advance strategic business objectives including the development of leaders at all levels. But evaluation must be built into the design.

We have to specify the type of leaders needed by the organization, how they will be evaluated, and the relevance of their leadership to business success and individual progress. Whoever nominates the person has to work with them from the outset to create buy-in, establish relevance, and ensure there is a shared expectation of what will occur as a result of training. Then, **in the immediate aftermath of the session or sessions**, an action plan should be generated and diligently tracked. Based on the results achieved, the training or other input should be assessed, recalibrated, enhanced, or ditched. The level of enjoyment and quality of training delivery performance are relative peripherals **by themselves if decoupled from impact** and should not take center-stage. Such a process is necessarily time and energy intensive, **but needed** in order to **really** engage and develop our leaders and teams as they seek to add strategic business value to organizational assets.

David Maister says the first thing companies must do is put systems into place to underwrite what people

are being trained to accomplish. The organization through direct bosses needs to motivate people to take full advantage of their training by establishing its strategic importance. Knowledge should be provided of what the participants are to achieve as a result of their training **to maximize relevance**. Only under these circumstances then can the development of skills, **which is what the training time is essentially about**, both take place and take hold.

**Even after these gates are passed**, to be called “training,” the engagement must be high on practice, application, coaching, feedback and feedforward (future-based performance goals). It must offer a chance to be assessed and improve from an initial base line. This may require not an event but rather a real process.

In order to be cost-effective during difficult periods,



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We are experts in the process of unlocking potential and focusing this in the right ways on the right aims; and we excel at emotionally engaging leaders and teams to own the change, take accountability for it and deliver it. In short ... **‘We do the really hard part of the soft stuff.’**

we should remove generic training budgets. As Paul Kearns suggests, we should separate training into the things people *have* to learn for their role or position and the things they *should* learn to fulfill the potential of their role or position **or things the organization wishes to inculcate (for example company values)** as part of their citizenship requirements in that organization.

“Nice to do” items can be postponed or carefully provided as incentives—frosting on the overall development effort. Things people in the organization *have* to know and *should* know, particularly non-technical abilities required of leaders as they move into successive roles—how to manage people, understanding the difference between strategy and tactics, getting teams to work effectively, process improvement, guiding innovation, delivering projects, selling ideas, products, or services, coaching and mentoring those who report to them—need to be linked to some line of sight business improvement, with an indication of where we expect to see business improvement as a result. The clearer the link, the more animated will be the application.

Then, all interventions should be designed accordingly. They should require significant line manager or boss engagement and, whenever possible, be undertaken with the very people the person will have to *deliver this with* (rather than a random assemblage of people who have never and may never see each other again in this regard).

Shockingly different? Possibly. But, if it is, it is also shockingly sane, sensible, practical, amenable to ROI—and, when the right conditions are met, very valuable.

Why it is deemed more “sensible” to expend budgets seeking the Holy Grail of “development” with scant preparation, a design detached from the actual value sought, experiences created with theatrical flourish perhaps but without connection to real outcomes we wish to track, and virtually no follow through of actual application and value to the business, is hard to understand.

*Omar Khan, March 2010*