How to Get the ROI You Want from Learning and Development Programs

by

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You deserve a substantial return on your investment in Learning and Development.

If your organization invests in assessments and training programs, the outcomes you expect and are paying for are more effective leaders, stronger teams and better results.

But if these programs don't create long-term changes in behavior and improved performance, you may be pouring time and money down a hole.

And you're not alone.

More than $150 BILLION dollars is spent each year on employee training. Yet it's estimated that between 70% and 90% of that money is wasted because most of the participants don't actually apply what they learned when they're back on the job. And you can't get back the time spent away from the job to participate in learning activities.

The hard truth about learning and development programs

Feedback. Identifying strengths and areas for improvement through 360-degree feedback is an important first step, because it allows you to focus learning and development programs where they're needed most.

But by itself, feedback isn't enough to change behavior.

Training and development. This vital second step introduces managers and employees to knowledge and skills you want them to use on the job. Attendees can learn best practices and become familiar with the how-to.

But by themselves, learning events aren't enough to change behavior, either.

In fact, even if you put the two together—feedback and targeted learning programs— this one-two developmental punch isn't enough to improve skills and produce better results.

A common scenario

After people have attended an outstanding training program, there's often an afterglow of good feelings for the instruction they received. They're eager and motivated to use what they learned.

The assumption is that if the training is excellent, and the learners buy into the content, they'll apply the skills back on the job.

But this isn't what really happens.

Most of the time, even when learners agree with the new way, they revert back to what they've always done. After years of doing things the old way, these work habits are literally hard-wired in their brains, while the new skill isn't.

A conversation we had with an executive at a fast-growing start-up reveals why this happens. He explained that in his earlier career—34 years as a manager with a Fortune 500 company—there had never once been follow-up after the training programs he attended. He said that most of the training didn't stick—with him or anyone else. That's because...

KNOWING and DOING aren't the same thing

Learning events can introduce the how-to. But knowing what to do—and even wanting to do it—doesn't mean someone will start using the skills and practices on the job.

The reason: most behavior in a busy workplace is triggered automatically by ingrained habits and skills, not conscious decisions.

For an improved behavior to become a habit or skill, it must become hard-wired in the brain. And this can happen only after many repetitions of the behavior through a lot of on-the-job application.

How the brain rewires itself for a new skill

The repetition of a behavior stimulates the brain cells involved to physically connect with each other, creating a circuit that triggers the behavior automatically. This takes time, because the circuit-building process requires lots of repetitions.

Also, a person's old habits are already wired in the brain. That's why they kick in automatically, even though a better, more effective way has been introduced.

With commitment and effort, learners can consciously decide to do something else, such as exercising a new skill highlighted by 360-degree feedback and training.

But your ROI comes back to you only if people actually apply what they've learned over and over until they've rewired their brains for the new skill.

Unfortunately, this usually doesn't happen. Most executives – and even many learning and HR professionals – don't realize the amount of practice and reinforcement required to make a skill an automatic habit.

Instead, they believe that if training does a good job of presenting the best practices, attendees will use them on the job. They don't appreciate that the real work of learning begins after instruction is over.

Why it's hard to replace old habits with new ones

Because a skill is new, people sometimes forget to use it, or they execute it awkwardly.

When this happens in a busy workplace, old habits kick in. These missteps are frustrating and discouraging, creating a crucial moment in the learning process that we call:

THE CRUNCH POINT

The failures pile up and people begin to think, Maybe this isn't a good fit for me. They feel like giving up and going with what's already comfortable—their old habits.

If this happens, there goes your ROI—money down the drain.

What learners don't realize is that to get past the crunch point, all they have to do is keep trying—to persist in spite of frustration and discouragement.

It takes a lot of repetitions to stimulate the construction of new brain circuits. If people stick with it, eventually the circuits will start to form, and learners' success rates will gradually improve. The skills will get easier. With consistent effort over the long haul, the new habits will replace the old ones, and the new behavior patterns will begin to kick in automatically.

The question is: What will keep people from giving up?

The value of coaching

After receiving feedback or attending training programs, people need reminders, encouragement, suggestions and accountability so they continue to apply what they learned.

In other words, they need COACHING.

Think about professional athletes in individual sports like golf and tennis. They continuously invest in coaches who show them ways to take their game to the next level.

Then they follow through, applying what they learn over and over, getting feedback during practice and analyzing how to improve the next time. This follow-through takes time, but with coaching it results in improved performance.

Coaching is also a key reason why 12-step programs and Weight Watchers have been so successful for decades. To achieve their goals, participants need to make changes to ingrained lifestyle habits. The support of a sponsor and other caring individuals helps them stay on track as they work to adopt new behavior patterns.

If coaching is such a critical component in the formation of lasting, positive habits, why don't more organizations make it an integral part of the learning experience?

Some companies do bring in external coaches for their executives, but it's just not economically feasible to supply professional coaches for every person who attends training.

And it's not necessary. What's needed are a few people who care about the success of the learner and who are willing to offer support coaching: reminding, giving feedback, encouraging, holding accountable. These are commonsense helping behaviors you'd want employees to use with each other anyway.

Who could play this kind of support coaching role? Coworkers. Colleagues. Other participants in feedback and learning programs. The person's manager.

One key individual is the person who serves as accountability coach. If they're honest, most people would admit they want someone who will hold their feet to the fire to make sure they follow through—someone they can count on to be "in their corner."

The best accountability coaches check in with learners regularly to see if they're following through on their commitments. Knowing they'll have to face their coach's questions helps program participants stay on track during moments of weakness, distraction or potential excuse-making.

This is the kind of follow-up process that creates a "coaching culture." In a systematic way, people help each other get past the crunch point.

Technology solutions that support long-term follow-through and a coaching culture

Today, there are two customizable platforms that simplify the assessment and development components.

It starts with gathering feedback using a flexible software platform. [20/20 Insight](#) revolutionized 360-degree feedback in the 1990s, making it practical for an organization to hold a mirror up to the behavior of every one of its employees. Millions of people worldwide have used 20/20 Insight in feedback programs. Today, there are literally dozens of online feedback systems, but none is as versatile, customizable, economical, and easy to administer as 20/20 Insight.

And now there's a technology to support the long-term follow-through needed to coach learners past the crunch point. [Strong for Performance](#) facilitates a support coaching network for every program participant and provides 24/7 access to learning content, encouragement and accountability until new skills are ingrained, one skill at a time. The program is a customizable interactive platform that supports a coaching culture.

Once you understand the realities—what needs to happen for learners to overcome old habits and replace them with new ones—you can achieve the return on your investment you want and expect.

For more information about these programs contact:

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