

Why Most Training Doesn't Work and What You Can Do About It

A hospital scores low for patient service, and to solve the problem, it brings in training from the outside. The employees participate in the training, and the evaluations look great. But six months later, almost all of those in attendance are acting exactly as they did before going to the session.

An information technology group has high turnover. They decide to solve the problem by bringing in someone to work with their supervisors. The training occurs, and some of the participants try to implement the skills discussed. One of them works with a problem employee for two months and concludes that probation is the only suitable option. When he approaches human resources, however, he is told, "We don't fire people here. We are desperate in your department. Find another way." At that point, the supervisor wonders why he went through supervision skills training in the first place.

Situations such as those described above happen countless times each week in organizations of all sizes. At its best, a random training effort prompts employees to take initiative. At its worst, poorly planned training can do exactly the opposite of what it's supposed to do.

Solutions That Don't Work

The Hit-Man Solution

You don't really know where you want to end up; you just know that it should be better than where you are now. The day of the session, the instructor goes through her prepared material. It seems rather generic to you. You wish that you had taken the time to give her a clearer understanding of what you wanted when she called and asked you. The more you think about it, maybe training wasn't the right answer at all, at least not now.

The Good-Enough-for-the-Frontline Solution

You make the front-line employees attend training. You even put it on the supervisors' calendars, but emergencies come up and several of them have to miss most of it. Because the supervisors do not buy into the program and/or show their enthusiasm by attending, the employees write off the day. A few of them even tell the facilitator that "the wrong people are in the room, and the supervisors need to be there if change is really going to happen."

The Silver-Bullet Solution

This solution is often a combination of the first two. You've got a problem of some sort, and you hope that it can be fixed quickly with minimal money, effort, and pain. You don't have a plan for assessing your current situation, and you don't have a plan for following up. You are looking for a miracle cure. You expect one or two days of training alone to change years of behavior. Does this solution remind you of an infomercial that you know can't possibly be true? It should.

Experts are terrific, but it's important to keep in mind that consultants and facilitators are just that--consultants and facilitators. They can work with your organization to guide the change process, but they alone can't move the organization. You too must do your part to ensure that even the smallest training session is both meaningful and sustainable:

1. Be realistic about where you are now, how you got there, and the resources you are prepared to commit to the process. If, for example, your service staff is rude, is that a result of bad hiring, or has the volume increased to the point where great service would take a miracle? Were the people in service never given any clear direction of what was expected and how to do their jobs? Just as no qualified surgeon would begin an operation without getting a full medical history, you need to have a complete understanding of your organization's "before" picture.
2. Commit to the process. Just as people who buy a treadmill are enthusiastic about exercising before they start to "feel the burn," it is easy to get excited about the *idea* of improving your organization. The reality, however, is that real change requires hard work and routine. It's easy for priorities to change when other "emergencies" come up. And in the case of process change, when you quit the program or slack off, you take a lot of other people with you.
3. Articulate what you want your organization to look like in a month, three months, six months, and a year. This piece doesn't sound like rocket science, but it is amazing how many organizations fail to set clear, measurable goals. Without goals in place, it's hard for people to understand where the organization is headed.
4. Decide what standards of behavior you expect from others and communicate those standards clearly. If you expect people to behave in a certain way, you have to tell them. And if possible, involve them in deciding the standards. Employees who participate in deciding rules are more likely to follow them.
5. Walk your talk. If you don't follow the standards, why should anyone else?
6. Give people the tools they need to be successful. Most people wouldn't ask a carpenter to build a house without any building materials. Yet, day after day people are given responsibilities they have not had the training to handle. Then, when they don't perform well, they're punished.
7. Constantly assess what's working and what is not. This means that ultimately you must hold people accountable for their actions; you must fix broken processes; you must recognize and reward the behaviors you want to see people exhibit.

Above all, when trying to make changes—even small ones—you must stress progress over perfection. Real change is not an event; it's a process, and there are no magic solutions.