



Is Training Dead?

Is there any point in Leadership and Management Development Training?

I recently turned down an opportunity to design and deliver a large Team Leadership program to one of our long-term clients. As I put the phone down, I realized this was the fourth or fifth time this year that I had refused the opportunity to deliver a significant – and well-paying - program to one of our best clients. Why?

Simply put, the program was not going to work. The reasons were typical of why we should always be wary of thinking that training is a magic answer to how to improve skills, especially leadership and management skills. Whenever a problem arises in an organization, management's instinctive reflex is "Let's organize a training program!"

The reasons are simple. Training is highly visible, we can target large numbers in a short period and, critically, it gives management the illusion of action. But it mostly doesn't work and there are several key reasons why it so often fails to change anything.

It is important to remember the difference between training and education. The end product of training is changed behavior, not just the knowledge of new concepts, but the ability to adapt and apply these concepts to the working environment. This implies knowing exactly what you want to change and how to measure it. And this is the first reason why training so often fails: we neglect to make sure we have clear metrics to measure the success or failure of the training program. Recently, when I asked one of our clients how he was going to measure the success of a proposed training program he was at a loss to provide an answer. He admitted not having thought about this key question. When I pressed him, all he could come up with was "I want the group to be happy together", distinctly not a measurable



metric. The problem of training with no metrics is illustrated by this cartoon:

Another critical reason why training so often fails to deliver is that the participants do not perceive the relevance of spending a few hours, days or even weeks being trained. A few years ago, a large corporation went through a period of serious problems caused by some rogue managers who had got involved in some unethical business deals. After firing the managers concerned, the main response of the senior management team was to train everybody in “ethics and integrity”. The program was a complete failure because there was no effort to communicate to employees why this program was necessary and especially how it could be positively useful to them in their day-to-day decision making. Employees at all levels felt punished for the faults of a few black sheep. This is an excellent illustration of why communication, before, during and after a training program, has to be well planned and executed. Otherwise, even the best-designed training program will fail.

A third reason training so often fails is that it is viewed as a stand-alone “magic pill” solution. It never is. In leadership and management development programs especially, it is critical to plan and organize reinforcing actions, such as coaching and mentoring and making sure managers are able to be excellent models of the competencies being taught and practiced to their employees in the training sessions. How often have I heard participants leaving a training session say “We wish our managers were going to take this program, they really need it”.

I use this check list for developing and delivering successful leadership and management training programs.

1. What skills, competencies, behaviors do we want to change?
2. How are we going to measure our success?
3. How are we going to positively communicate to our participants the benefits to them of following the program?
4. How are we going to communicate to our participants post-program?
5. How are going to make sure that senior management models the new behaviors?
6. What post-training programs will we be putting in place to reinforce what was learnt and started to be applied during the training session(s)?

A few months ago, using this check list, we designed and successfully delivered this program to improve our client’s ability to attract and retain top-performing employees at all levels.

In the initial phase, we determined the key metrics we would be using. They included our client's data on turnover rates and reasons for leaving given during exit interviews.

The results of this phase immediately led to a redesign of the organization's onboarding process. The need for this only became clear when our initial data was analyzed.

Then we measured the senior management team's ability to provide constructive leadership to their junior management and to the organization as a whole. We used Human Synergistics Leadership WorkStyles® 360° profile technology to obtain an objective measure of this ability, which naturally varied from manager to manager. These profiles, together with the data from our initial phase, told us which leadership skills the senior managers most needed to develop and improve.

Then we launched a 1-on-1 coaching program for each senior manager. The objectives for this program were to use and improve the deficient skills and competencies we knew we had to focus on. They included the ability to coach and mentor junior managers and other key employees, the ability to give constructive feedback, the ability to recognize and reward good performance and the ability to keep employees aware of the "big picture" of where the organization was and was planning to continue developing and growing.

After six months of this 1-on-1 coaching for senior managers, it was time to train the junior managers. Prior to their training sessions, they too received the same type of Human Synergistics Leadership WorkStyles® 360° profiles that their senior managers had already received. This meant that, after the training sessions, when the senior managers started coaching and mentoring their junior managers, they would all be talking and using the same language.

After the training sessions, the senior managers started to systematically coach and mentor their juniors, and we, as outside consultants, continued to coach the senior managers, essentially a "coach-the-coach" program.

After 12 months, we remeasured the turnover statistics and the reasons given in exit interviews by those who decided to leave the organization. The employee turnover rate had gone from 27% annually to just below 15%. This was still above the client's target of 7% or less, but the trend was clearly in the right direction. Key information came from the reasons for leaving given during exit interviews. Instead of a smorgasbord of complaints about management, the main problems highlighted were concentrated around the need to enrich jobs and to clearly communicate promotion and career

advancement opportunities. This led to redesigning many job descriptions and designing and delivering short training and information sessions at various levels.

Throughout the program, senior management communicated why the program was important and gave frequent updates on progress.

As you can see, the training sessions were only a small part of the overall program. They were fun, they used a variety of learning and practicing strategies, including team survival simulations and many small-group break-out discussions. So they were both very visible and very enjoyable. But without the other key elements of coaching, mentoring, redesigning the onboarding program and many of the job descriptions, they would have been an enjoyable failure – and nothing would have changed.

The lesson is that training is not dead. It can be a very powerful accelerator of positive change, but only as long as it is used as part of an integrated strategy of actions to define, deliver, reinforce and measure what it is we want to change and improve.