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Why Training Doesn't Stick:
Who is to Blame?

ABSTRACT

This article, "Why Training Doesn't Stick," presupposes that it does
not, and that, as a matter of course, it is a waste of precious dollars to
send someone to a workshop or a seminar for training. Soon after
training goes the assumption that the trainee will be doing things the
old way. While acknowledging that at least sometimes that training
does stick, the author has come to understand that the conditions under
which training is successful are so specific and so rarely met that when it
happens it is the exception rather than the rule. "Who is to blame?" The
author answers that question by explaining how we can turn the tables
and make "training that sticks" the rule rather than the exception.

TRAINING AND CHANGE

For over two years now, this author has been trying to understand
change—what causes it, who causes it, why it is resisted, and what can be
done to help assist with moving with change and aiding to help shape it.
These are the questions that come with the territory as a developer of
in-service training programs that keep the staff up to date with the
fast-changing times. In her book, *Effective On-the-Job Training*, Sheila
Creth (1986), director of the University of Iowa Libraries, explicitly
draws the link between training and change: "First and foremost, train-
ing should be seen as a *change agent*" (p. 5).

That is, most of the programs developed or arranged for should ask
people to change their ways, to do things differently or think differently
from the way they are accustomed, in order to be effective in today's
library and in order that the library be effective in today's world. One

observation is that the majority will leave a workshop or seminar feeling good about it and wanting—perhaps eager—to apply what was learned. But, those very same people are comfortably back to their old ways a month or two later—nothing has changed.

This cannot be attributed to laziness, less intelligence, lack of desire, or fear. The phenomenon is too widespread. Though the picture is slowly beginning to change, the professional literature has not paid much attention to the problem to date, but it is a most interesting topic to examine. However, other occupations have given it some thought. They call it "transfer of training"; or sometimes "transfer failure." On the one hand, there are some interesting theoretical speculations and studies by learning theorists that shed some light. A little of that literature will be reviewed here. And on the other hand, there are practitioners, mostly personnel and management specialists, who write about how to make training stick—they don't worry about the whys of it; they just tell us what to do about it, and some of their insights will also be shared with the hope that more librarians will be encouraged to work on the problem.

Change Versus Habits

Change is inevitable. Throughout the history of this planet and the history of the inhabitants of this planet, there is nothing that has not changed. This is not a new revelation. How many times have you heard that "the only thing that doesn't change is change" or "the more things change the more things remain the same"; but when you think about it, that is pretty amazing.

Even an art museum docent was heard to say that art changes. I hadn't thought about it till then, but, when I did, my first thought was: "You'd think that to paint a face is to paint a face: two eyes, a nose, a mouth. How can that change? But in fact there's an Etruscan face, a Renaissance face, a Cubist face, an Impressionist face—and all are different and represent a different period in time. If change is inevitable, then why aren't we built to adapt to it? Why does there seem to be the inevitable resistance to it?

One way of seeing that we indeed are built to resist change is to think about the function that habits serve. Habits free us from having to make choices about everything in life—i.e., from having to notice or concentrate on all of life's stimuli. Habits take time to develop. It might be said that a habit is formed when learning is complete, so one can appreciate the fact that when someone is asked to do things differently, it will take time to change from the old habit. For example, it is possible to drive to and from work everyday remembering nothing about the ride because of the familiarity. Move to another place and you will find that it is some time before you do not have to think about where you are going or, going home, you will, from habit, head for your old neighborhood. Courtesy is another habit—e.g., please, thank you. Those aren't

natural; we weren't born saying those words. Those aren't even commonsense things to say. We had to work at them. How often did our parents say: "Say thank you to the nice lady?"

There are, of course, bad habits—e.g., drug addiction, smoking, poor diet. From those we have some clue about how hard it is to break a habit. We know we are doing wrong, and yet it is so hard to change.

The time it takes to change is related to whether or not unlearning is required. That is, as we go through life, we are constantly learning new things and creating new habits. And that generally goes well when we haven't had to break old habits. Automatically fastening a seatbelt might be one example of this: a new driver will take to seatbelts much faster than an old driver because the new driver has not developed the habit of entering and starting a car without first going through the motions of fastening a seatbelt.

But when it comes to breaking old habits to attain the same goal in a new way or to abandon one behavior and substitute another, the problem becomes more complex. It is not a matter of just new learning. It requires disconnecting from old learning. The longer it took to gain the old learning, the longer it will take to disconnect from it—to unlearn it. An example would demonstrate that axiom vividly: you are given a task to perform that you had never done before, and you are timed as to how long it takes you to do it. You repeat the task several times, and with each repetition you perform the task in less time and thereby develop a kind of habit. Then you are asked to do the task in a new way. It will take longer to perform the task in a new way than it took to perform it the first time when there were no preconceived impressions to dispel.

CHANGE TAKES TIME

So unlearning is a contributor to resistance. Unless you are very motivated, the odds are that you will give up. Rationality doesn't necessarily enhance motivation. Some know well the benefits of seatbelts, but it takes a law to make us wear them.

Let us now examine how unlearning contributes to resistance. Learning theorists divide learning into four stages:

Stage 1: Unconscious Incompetent (UI). You are not even aware there is something to be learned (e.g., skill, theory, and its applications).
Stage 2: Conscious Incompetent (CI). You are aware there is something to be learned.
Stage 3: Conscious Competent (CC). You learn the skill, concepts, and procedures and can apply what you learned with mistakes and omissions.
Stage 4: Unconscious Competent (UC). You can perform well without thinking about it.

How to get from the CC stage to the UC stage is the trick. Most retreat before they get to the UC stage. The reason is that the route from

CC to UC is unpleasant: we must become incompetent for a time and must do so in the eyes of people who regarded us as competent; we must abandon attitudes and practices that worked rather well and were efficient in favor of attitudes and practices which are uncomfortable and which make us temporarily inefficient. We must disconnect the neurological ruts we once created so as not to have to think before we act—in other words, we must unlearn—so as to be able to begin the long process of forming new neurological ruts.

When in a slump in learning development, we are usually unaware of learning theory that would explain that the slump is natural and expected and that the big payoff is just around the corner. Perhaps we are simply on the "forgetting" side of a normal learning curve, and by sticking with it we enter the very rewarding "relearning" phase.

For example, a competent typist is sent to be trained in word processing. The first day back from training it takes her six hours to type a one-page letter that could have been completed in five minutes on a trusty electric typewriter. In this CC stage, the typist has taken a giant step backward. You can understand why it is likely she will abandon the effort, even though she may be aware that if she became a UC, she would perform at a higher level than when she was an UI.

So change—that is, learning to do something a new way—takes time and more time than we realize. It takes more time than a training session and more time than a week of training sessions. It requires time to unlearn and time to be incompetent. Once these facts are accepted, half the battle is won. Progress is made toward preventing transfer failure. Or, the other way around, we are moving toward ensuring training transfer. In addition to time, two other factors need to be in place for change or training transfer to be successful: (1) the trainee's commitment to change, and (2) the supervisor's (or institution's) commitment to change.

Trainee's Commitment to Change

The trainee needs to have a strong commitment to change. A. J. Anderson (1985/86) in an interesting article in *Journal of Library Administration* in which he examines change in managers from a psychoanalytic standpoint, describes the views of M. Scott Myers (1970) in *Every Employee a Manager*. Discussing why it is so difficult for managers to change, Myers claims that knowledge of management theories rarely leads to changed behavior. Deliberate and intensive efforts must be made to apply the theories. Using a slightly different learning stages model from the UI to UC model, Myers says:

"the application of theory generally requires a four-step process:
Step 1. Awareness
Step 2. Understanding
Step 3. Commitment to change
Step 4. New habits
The first step, *awareness*, may result from reading a book or article, attending a

workshop, listening to a convincing speech. The person gains superficial insight into a new theory and the implied deficiency in his or her present way of doing things. Step two, *understanding*, may result when the person recognizes a possible need to change. This is the "intellectual condition" stage. The person might read [more] and attend seminars and training programs, even to the point of becoming an articulate spokesperson on behalf of the theory, but his or her management style continues to follow old habit patterns [the 'do as I say, not as I do' type].

The next step, *commitment to change*, is a most important one in the process. It occurs when the person becomes aware of the discrepancy between his newly adopted theory and his everyday behavior, and believes he will benefit personally through changing his behavior. (Anderson, 1985/86)

Anderson (1985/86) says that: "Myers points out that initial attempts to change are often discouraging, and if not reinforced by some type of rewarding feedback, may be abandoned." Finally, step four, the *new habits* step. "New habits are established when sustained deliberate application of the new theory finally results in attitude changes and automatic and natural expressions of the desired changes in style of management." For change in management style, getting through stage 4 can take five to ten years. Most people, according to Myers, never progress beyond step 2.

What Myers and Anderson are describing is not limited to managers trying to change their style. For any significant change in behavior, going beyond step 2 requires "sustained deliberate application" of new learning. Anderson sums up the problem well: "students or workshop participants must assume responsibility for their own learning." (You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink.) Anderson's words are "nothing will happen to those who do not persevere." And if you read enough into "nothing," you might decide that he is giving out a death sentence.

To be taught is not necessarily to learn. As Anderson (1985/86) puts it: "The laws of habit formation hold true in the mind as they do in the body....Why is it that so many people you know seem to remain the same regardless of the number of courses they have taken? Why do they present one style to the world and never deviate from it....[Can] people remake themselves as a result of taking courses and attending workshops[?]....These questions raise the issue of what education can and cannot accomplish." Anderson (1985/86) concludes that it is not easy to change: "*some* people *can* change *certain* aspects of themselves and their behavior IF they *want* to badly enough, and if they are *willing* to *work* hard enough at it. The key words here are *some, can, certain, want, willing,* and *work.*" On the grounds that we are made up of a combination of traits—some inborn and related to physical makeup, some relating to intellect; and other traits derived from our surroundings, experiences, and other external influences—Anderson looks to physiologists Ernst Kretschmer and W. H. Sheldon, psychologists Freud and Jung, and philosopher Edouard Spranger for enlightenment.

They all categorize human beings into personality types. And in

one way or another, they all conclude that modifications must lie within the boundaries of one's original type-nature. For Anderson, that is why the emphasis on certain people can change if they want to badly enough. There is no question that attitude and motivation have a great deal to do with whether one is capable of changing their behavior and practices. "That proverb 'You can take a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink' applies here....You can take a student to the classroom, but you cannot ensure that the things you wish to impart will be assimilated. For this to happen a person must want to change....[The students'] cooperation with the teacher in the learning process is essential....Given our basic natures, where thinking tends to harden into habit and where behavior takes on a relatively fixed form, progress from the old to the new can be accomplished only in the face of much mental and emotional resistance. Old mind sets have to be resolved into a hospitable flexibility in order that new attitudes and expectancies may be formed. *This takes time* [emphasis added]."

When library training programs are measured against time standards such as these, it doesn't give a person much time. Ruth Clark (1986), California Edison training manager, says that "even after an excellent class, training frequently fails to pay off in behavioral changes on the job" (p. 83). She says that people go back to work and do it the way they have always done it instead of the way they were taught in the class. This phenomenon is called "transfer failure." "It happens," says Clark (1986), "because skills do not transfer automatically into job performance. In other words, the fact that you have learned how to do something a certain way doesn't necessarily mean you'll do it that way. Since the point of job-related training is to improve performance on the job, transfer failure obviously defeats the whole purpose" (p. 83).

Supervisor's or Institution's Commitment to Change

Dana Robinson and James Robinson (1985) put the responsibility for transfer of training on more than the trainee: "Skills are transferred when both the learning experience and the work environment work together to achieve the same results. The following formula captures this concept: LE x WE = Results" (pp. 82-83). LE refers to learning experience and describes the learning activity in which the learner participated. The trainer is responsible for this part of the equation. WE represents the work environment of the learner; the day-to-day environment in which the learner works following the program. "Line management must ensure that the environment supports, reinforces and rewards the learner for using the new skills and knowledge. A zero on either side of the multiplication sign yields a zero in sustained results from training" (p. 82). Most libraries score zero on the WE side.

Becky Schreiber (1985), independent consultant in Maryland, gets more specific about this follow-up back in the work environment. She argues for ensuring on the job coaching to help a trainee who has

returned from a workshop to practice the skills learned (pp. 123-24). Much like an athletic coach, she wants someone there to encourage, provide reinforcement, and offer constructive corrective advice as one goes about their work. "The likelihood of transferring skills without coaching is low." Until performance reflects new skills, it cannot be said that the skills have been learned (p. 133). "To set up a coaching experience, there needs to be teamwork among three key individuals— the seminar participant, her/his supervisor, and the seminar leader.... [Participants] must be willing to shed their professional roles and their need to be seen as fully competent so that they can become students again" (Schreiber, 1985, p. 123). (Consider again the stages of learning: becoming a student again—the CC stage—means showing yourself as less than competent. You can see why the prospect of becoming a CC would be a big part of the reason why there is resistance.

Also, "if participants are...clear on which skills they intend to learn, they will demonstrate a high level of personal initiative about learning these skills and be better focused on how they can use them on the job" (Schreiber, 1985, p. 123). Skills transfer is given its best chance, according to Schreiber (1985), when

—coaching opportunities—during and after the workshop—are built into the design of the training workshop;
—there is a clear understanding and agreement between workshop leader and participants about content and methods of the seminar;
—before leaving the workshop, participants do specific strategy planning with action steps and time lines. This is an opportunity for participants to anticipate the barriers that may prevent them from using their new skills;
—back-on-the-job coaching begins as soon as they return from the workshop and continues till learning is completed and new behavior is formed. A key consideration here should be the comfort of the staff member. There needs to be a high level of trust between the trainee and coach so that risk-taking occurs and genuine constructive feedback is provided and self-confidence develops. The immediate supervisor may serve as coach if the relationship reflects that kind of trust. Sometimes, however, the dual responsibility of coaching and evaluating is difficult for the supervisor. Supervisors should be encouraged to examine this dilemma with a bias toward seeing both roles as a staff development function of their jobs. If they are unable to resolve the issue, it would be difficult for the supervisor to be a good coach;
—feedback is recognized as a primary tool of the coaching experience— feedback about both successes and failures (pp. 123-24).

Michael Kruger and Gregory May (1985), in their article "Two Techniques to Ensure that Training Programs Remain Effective," express the problem of training transfer in terms of investment and return. They look at the amount of money organizations spend in training—e.g., $40.6 million is spent each year in the federal govern-

ment alone just in training managers—and conclude that "these invest-
ments indicate that organizational decision makers place a high priority
on this type of training. Yet that investment often represents an expres-
sion of faith since the link between what is learned in the classroom and
what is applied on the job is usually tenuous" (p. 70). Two conditions
must be met, they claim, to increase the likelihood that the training
investment actually results in a return at the workplace: *relevance to
needs* and *reinforcement mechanisms* (p. 70). Relevance—that is, train-
ing that meets the needs of participants—"boosts motivation to learn.
Thus the level of readiness to learn, the so-called 'teachable moment' is
heightened" (Kruger & May, 1985, p. 70). But training programs must
also be reinforced: "They must also include strategies that enhance the
application of learning in the workplace" (p. 70). Though organiza-
tions regard training as critical, as demonstrated by the amount of time
and money invested in it, paradoxically, Kruger and May (1985) main-
tain that, "it is the exception rather than the rule for organizations to
expend the effort needed to ensure that a reinforcement of learning will
occur at the workplace following the training" (p. 70).

Change, Or Else...

You might ask why this is so important now. It seems that more
noticeably than ever, the library, just like everything else, is changing—
big changes and fast-happening changes—and it's happening with or
without us. All the thinkers of the profession tell us that. Pat Battin
(1984) has said that: "Far from being extinct in the electronic university,
librarians will be in greater demand than in the more serene and
organized world of the book" (pp. 12-17). Richard De Gennaro (1984)
said that: "The emphasis in libraries is shifting from collections to
access. Providing access to information will be the principal goal and
activity, and coping with technology and change will be the principal
driving forces of the emerging information age library" (p. 1205). Kevin
Hegarty (1985) (director, Tacoma Public) has said that: "The entire
organizational structure of a library will be affected by the automated
system, and the method of doing business will be drastically changed"
(p. 43). Marilyn Mason (1985) (from the public library sector) stated that:
"Within ten years over half of the service provided to library users will
be to individuals who never come into the library" (p. 137).

Richard Rowe (1987), president and CEO of Faxon, in an "On My
Mind" column in *American Libraries* was more provocative in his
predictions about change. He bluntly states that librarians today aren't
ready to manage in this fast-changing world of information. Frankly, he
says, librarians "do not have much of an edge in qualifying for that CIO
[chief information officer]...."

> We can't just sit back and see the future happen and think that we are going to
> have an important role in the future simply because of the importance of
> information, or because of the past importance of libraries. That won't be
> enough...librarians must change. We're going to have to be open to new ideas.

> We are going to have to stretch ourselves and take some risks....[We can't assume that] since we've been in the business for 20 years we know what our users want....We've got to let go of current assumptions about our roles. We've got to keep our eye on the long term value of why we are here. (Rowe, 1987, p. 297)

Rowe (1987) ends with: "Change is inevitable. Change is an opportunity for things to go better or worse. It's up to us to make those decisions and to do it now."

Of course, even if all these important people never said a word, we know the statements are accurate; we can see it before our eyes. Who has the same job they had five years ago? If your present job existed five years ago, did the previous person do things in the same way as they are done now? Probably not. If you've been in the current job for a while, are newly-hired coworkers required to have skills or approaches different from yours? If asked to guess what differences there would be in your job five years from now, you might not be able to come up with a crystal ball answer, but it would probably be difficult to say "I doubt there'll be any changes." What do you think those changes will be and how do you plan to prepare for them?

What about people who don't want to change? There is much concern about that. At an ALA/LAMA/PAS program on "Training Issues in Changing Technology," Ruth Person, associate dean at Catholic University of America, talked about "human factors in adopting library technology." She said, "change itself is problematic for many individuals....[While there are] several categories of individuals who *embrace* change in the adoption of innovation (innovators, pacesetters), [there are] far more individuals who approach the change process with everything from hesitancy to real fear....Individuals may fear being displaced, disconnected from old patterns, dehumanized by machinery" (Person, 1986).

A leading head reference librarian in a large academic library and known for her forward thinking, competence, and innovation, confided that she will retire next year at age 55, much earlier than she would have thought. She hates what is happening in reference—i.e., sitting at a keyboard and having a database regurgitate is boring to her. The excitement of discovery, moving from place to place and back again, is what brought her into the profession, and she sees that as becoming passe, not just for librarians but for researchers. She worries that new researchers will become passive and understand research to be whatever is findable at their fingertips and deliverable to their door through a document delivery service. She thinks the online medium encourages new and terrible habits based on implied assumptions they lead you to come to.

Practical Steps Toward Achieving Training Transfer

Now that it is understood why training does not stick and what the solutions to the problem are, what would an effective training program look like in a library setting? The following are ten conditions that an

effective library training program should meet in order to ensure training transfer:

1. The training program should be relevant to the needs of the trainee and should be perceived as relevant by the trainee.
2. There should be a three-way agreement about the objectives of the training program among the trainee, the trainer, and the trainee's boss.
3. There should be a three-way agreement about the expectations of the trainee among the trainee, the trainer, and the trainee's boss.
4. Supervisors or higher-level managers ideally should attend a session of any training program they are planning for those who report to them.
5. Supervisors and trainees should plan the program follow-up.
6. A supervisor or a higher level manager should agree that there will be no blame for a trainee's slip-ups during follow-up practice.
7. The trainee should leave the training session with a plan specifying how specific learned skills, attitudes, theories, etc. will be practiced and applied.
8. After the workshop, the trainee should practice with a coach and preferably another workshop trainee so that they can agree to coach each other.

   Notes: Ideally, practice should begin in a nonfamiliar environment; the new surroundings should bolster the formation of new behavior and thought patterns before it becomes necessary to break old patterns.

   Coaching requires no-blame feedback and should include both criticism and praise. If the trainee is the sole person from a unit to be trained, the trainee should be expected to give a report about the training program to the home unit telling coworkers what behaviors to expect, look for, listen for, ask about when missing, etc.

   No activity worth training for should be exempt from coaching (though for some activities it will be more difficult to implement than others). Managerial training, the reference interview, telephone skills, dealing with problem patrons, and competence in computer systems are all areas for follow-up coaching.
9. The trainee should be scheduled to give a progress report two weeks, two months, and six months after the workshop—describing specific applications of what was learned.
10. The institution should strive for achieving a critical mass of staff or managers competent in the desired skill. The critical mass will have been reached when those who possess the skill set the dominant standard. (Those who do not possess the skill are then self-motivated to change and can be expected to take responsibility to close the apparent gap between them and those who possess the skill.) The sooner that critical mass is reached, the earlier the desired change will be effective and the library's desired goals will be reached.

This discussion has not covered all of the issues related to change and resistance to it, but perhaps a dimension has been added that rounds out the picture and adds to the usual explanations of resistance—i.e., fear of the unknown, a need to cling to the past, a lack of motivation—a more positive and possibly more prevalent reason—the lack of a continuing learning environment.

If change is inevitable, and if library change is happening now with or without us, it seems that anyone who can help us move with change and shape it for the better is a friend. We need all the friends we can get so that we don't become irrelevant, so that we don't leave change to "new blood" or "the youth" or to someone else, so that *we* can remain a part of the future.

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