



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

FOUNDATION COURSES

'The very thought of you, and I forget to do,

Those little ordinary things that everyone ought to do.'

These great opening lines from Billie Holiday's song often come to mind when I think of the amount of times I think I have drummed a message into students only to despair when it is not transferred into the workplace and I am forced to confront the realisation that my training has failed!

As a management consultant and oft-times trainer, I often feel frustrated that after a conducting an effective and well-received training programme, I see little following impact. And that leads to self-doubt. I am left thinking 'is training worth it?' and 'what about training's return on investment?' The debate is almost as old as time itself – think of how poor God must have felt when he saw Adam bit into the apple and realised all his powers of persuasion had come to nought!

I'm not talking about hard skills training here. Hard skills are technical or administrative procedures related to the core business. Examples could include machine operation, financial procedures, safety standards and working on a computer. Typically they are concrete, easy to measure, easy to observe and easy to assess for results. And they are relatively easy to learn. One of the reasons for this is because the skill sets are normally brand new to the student and no unlearning is involved. On the flip side of the learning coin are the skills I am talking about here – so-called soft or people skills. People skills are harder to learn, typically hard to measure, hard to observe and even harder to quantify and qualify. People skills are used all the time in business and refer to how people relate to each other, how problems are tackled and solved, giving informative feedback, cooperating as a team member, adding values at meetings, resolving conflict etc.

Executive Recruitment | Strategic Planning | Organisational Transformation | HR Outsourcing
Management Assessment and Development | Training and Executive Coaching | Psychometric Testing

HRMC
Management Consultants

www.hrmc.co.bw

If we are to really understand why training fails we need to take a look at how learning takes place – especially how we learn to deal with each other. We learn the rudiments of those skills at a very early age and it's not in a classroom where learning is designed in a structured way. It's more of a haphazard approach. We watch how other people around us do things and we experiment, sometimes copy or antithesis-based on who is around us and what's happening. We soon figure out what works in terms of getting what we want and pleasing the people we want to please. Like all behaviour patterns these interpersonal skills become "hard wired" in the neuronal pathways of the cerebral cortex. This basically means that the behaviour is so often repeated that it forms a pattern and becomes second nature – natural, easy and comfortable.

Traditionally we approached the training of people skills from an attitude and behaviour perspective, working on the basis of giving people a positive message about why we should behave in a certain way and allowing them to feel positive about it. From the behaviour perspective we would teach how to act and behave and believed that the combination of attitude and behaviour training would get the desired results.

If only it was that easy.

Years of social programming accustoming us to behave in a certain way cannot be undone or corrected by replacing it with a new programme. There are some obvious differences between people and computers, one of which is that, unlike computers we cannot be easily re-programmed by inserting a CD and pressing a few buttons. Delete all files – yes or no? Permanently replace – yes or no?

People will only change behaviour if they are given a new set of behaviours that when repeatedly applied achieve better results than the old. At first the new behaviour is difficult, even when it makes sense and even when it is desired and expected. Only with continued reinforcement will people be able gradually to replace the old pattern with the new.

So this got me thinking - is it the training or the reinforcement that is lacking? Organisations invest heavily in soft skills training, recognising that if people can work better with colleagues, customers and everyone else they come into contact with, there can only be massive positive spin-offs for the organisation. However the reality is normally that there is no continuance or reinforcement plan in place. Years of follow-up with students who left the classroom convinced that their newly-learned skills would add value to their life and with an intense commitment to applying them, has suggested to me that without reinforcement the new behaviours do not establish themselves and the students predictably fall back on the old comfortable patterns they grew up with.

This is why when you send your students to hear Stephen Covey, Anthony Robbins or Tom Peters – the world's best motivators and behaviour analysts – attendance cannot by itself provide enough reinforcement to establish the new pathways needed to change ingrained behaviour patterns. Year after year we will send employees on the same courses – all well-structured and with good trainers. We call them refresher courses etc without realising that they cannot freshen up something that withered and died a year ago – that was when it needed watering, when the learned improvements still had a chance of taking root. It's too late now. We need to recognise and really understand that training is only the first step in the changing behaviour process.

Think of it this way; it is the pouring the concrete before building – just the foundations on which construction takes place. It is as simple as that.

If you want training to really work you must ensure that the application starts straight after the course. Only by systematic coaching, encouragement and continual reinforcement can organisations achieve the desired return on their on-going investment in people skills training. Start by explaining to line managers that if training fails they are to blame for not following through. And stop bemoaning the training departments for lack of results. We can only lay the foundation and pour the concrete –you have to build your own cathedral.

