

8 steps to effective training feedback

BY JACQUES GAUMOND

Imagine spending one-half of a year's salary on a new car and just leaving it parked in front of the house forever. The car never roars down the highway, so there's no way to gauge performance. It's never taken grocery shopping, so it's impossible to assess the trunk space. And the sound system is never cranked up, so nobody has any idea how good it is.

Few people would do that with a new car. But a remarkable number of organizations do the equivalent with employee training. They invest a substantial amount of money without ever doing preparatory work beforehand or seeking an accurate picture afterwards on what they gained for their money.

Many take a literal view of training feedback — they enquire about the trainee's satisfaction and degree of learning upon training completion, but seldom ask about the job impact, business benefit or returns from the training investment once the trainee is back on the job.

There are eight key steps to getting the most value from training budgets and obtaining the best information about training outcomes.

1 Identify training needs. Before training even starts, identify the kind of training the organization needs and wants to do, whether for new regulations, new technology or differentiation in the market. Regardless of whether it is offered in-house or by an outside supplier, run pilot projects and learn from them before deploying programs more widely throughout the organization.

This helps eliminate any differences between in-house and external training providers.

2 Create employee competency profiles. Before training actually starts, prepare a core competency profile for all employees. This helps determine which employees need what training and, as an added bonus, provides the organization with a system-wide inventory of the skills that already exist in-house.

3 Ask the basics. As soon as an individual has completed training, it is a good idea to ask him the basic question: "Did you find the training satisfactory?" This helps send a signal to the employee that the organization cares about training quality.

4 Find out what was learned. Organizations need to go beyond the basics and ask the employee: "Have you learned anything?" Follow up by asking for elaboration. Not enough organizations take this step, even though it is useful to gauge relevance and determine where training programs need tweaking.

5 Gauge the mid-term impact on the job. Few companies actually get to the heart of the impact of training on an individual's job. But new tools can make this step easy. Web-based tools, including 360-degree feedback, can help a trainer prepare detailed questionnaires for the employee and his peers, subordinates, clients, suppliers and supervisor, asking for observations about changed or improved behaviour. This should be done about three months after the training.

These questionnaires should be written using information

from employee competency profiles prepared before training. Rather than asking respondents to rate a certain competency on a scale of one to 10, the questions should be phrased in concrete terms. This allows respondents to make accurate observations about employee behaviour.

For example, ask: "Does the person build effective working relationships with other stakeholders?" The choices for answers should be along the lines of "never, rarely, sometimes, frequently, always or not applicable." The aggregated feedback should then be shared with the employee to create a true 360-degree view of his improvement.

6 Determine the effect on business. To gain a precise measurement of the impact training has had on business results, ask: "Did the trainee's division log improved sales or operating efficiencies since the training? Has there been a dollars-and-cents improvement to the bottom-line that can be traced back to the training? Has customer satisfaction improved against specific objectives?"

It's not really 360-degree feedback until the organization itself has had a say in training outcomes.

7 Measure the return on investment. Measuring the return on investment of training and reporting back to executives helps mould the shape of future training programs. Ask: "How much did sales or earnings rise for every dollar spent on training?"

In this day and age, more organizations should make conscious efforts to calculate ROI because it reveals if they should

invest more in training and development or if the training itself needs to be improved.

8 Gauge the long-term job impact. Prepare detailed questionnaires for the employee and those around him about six to 12 months after training completion. The questions should be tied to what the employee does and is supposed to do. This kind of long-term followup is rarely done but can provide invaluable data about the long-term value of different kinds of training.

There will, of course, be other things to take into account in the area of training feedback. For example, supervisor or trainer feedback and tracking are sufficient when the employee has been assigned to compliance training regarding new laws or regulations; on the other hand, full post-training assessments using 360-degree feedback is most appropriate for training on soft skills or launching a new product line.

In addition, it is no longer necessary to differentiate between senior- and lower-level employees when performing 360-degree training feedback. While senior and core employees obviously will receive more in-depth and frequent training than line employees, it is neither expensive nor difficult to obtain feedback on all employees who have taken training.

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