Improving Learning Transfer

A Guide to Getting More Out of What You Put Into Your Training

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GOWER
Dealing with Resistance

Introduction

The chapters that have gone before have been full of good advice, gathered from reputable sources, on how you can make the most of your organization’s learning and development efforts. On a local level, the building of a climate for transfer through good management practice, creating a set of conditions in which colleagues and the organization in general work together to ensure the investment in learning efforts is optimized, is of course a major contributor. At a broader level, the building of what we can call ‘learning organizations’ (although still a dream for people in most organizations) will further enhance learning capability.

So why doesn’t it work? If all the interested parties believe that learning is a good thing, why is it so hard to become a ‘learning organization’? At the top, for instance, its management wants to ensure that the skills, knowledge and other abilities it requires now and into the future are readily accessible. Further down, the bulk of employees want to know that opportunities for them to move up (or move on) are available to them. Yet real learning organizations are hard to find, and the often conflicting interests of a range of stakeholders – those who have an interest in the inputs, processes or outcomes of learning and development activities – make real learning transfer hard to achieve.

How Would We Recognize a Learning Organization?

Perhaps the answer may lie in the definition of a learning organization. Although clear and concise definitions are hard to come by, the following, from Garvin (1993, 80) seems to fit the bill. He defines it as ‘an organization skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights’. Thus organizations that can lay claim
to the title need not only to be able to generate new knowledge, but to use it in a practical way, to practise what they preach, as it were. This is not as easy as it sounds. Many organizations for example are in a position to generate new knowledge – from customers, from the collective wisdom of their members or from the world at large – yet in reality do not use this information as well as they might. Garvin would see the ability to transfer knowledge quickly around the organization as one of the key components of a learning organization. Another is the ability to experiment and learn from experience. Indeed the two practices go together, and it is probably in this arena that improvements in the practice of learning transfer most closely affect organizations’ ability to become learning organizations.

So, what is it that prevents them? To help explain, Dipboye (1997) offers some initial observations on why organizations fail to adopt and implement what the organizational literature would describe as effective training practices. He believes organizations:

- don’t implement an integrated systems design model in their training;
- don’t assess training and development needs;
- rarely evaluate their training programmes rigorously;
- often make irrational decisions about training;
- allow fads and fashions to dominate their training.

All of the above conditions have implications for the generalization and maintenance of learning. For instance, best practice training design factors discussed in Chapter 2 are part of an integrated systems design model. The importance of both accurate analysis of training needs and rigorous evaluation to determine whether they are being met has also been highlighted. In addition, anyone who has been on the receiving end of decisions made in some organizations regarding what training is supported and how it gets carried out will testify to many an inconsistency. Lastly, the success of bestsellers that fill airport bookshelves everywhere can be a clear indication of the latest fad. The fact that they are often on sale at half price within weeks can be an equally clear indication of how short-lived some of them are, and suggests that real answers are not as easy to find as some would have us believe. Allied to the factors already identified in Chapter 4 by Clarke (2002), such as heavy workloads, time
pressures and lack of reinforcement of training, we can see that there are a lot of pressures operating against successful learning transfer. It would seem that despite the broader, more strategic agreement around the needs of the organization, in the short term the needs of one group may directly clash with the needs of others, with the resultant negative consequences for the application and spread of new knowledge.

The Stakeholders

Who then are the primary stakeholders, and what are their primary concerns? Within the organization, they comprise senior management, managers and supervisors of trainees, peers of trainees and the trainees themselves. We can also add trainers and consultants, whether they operate from inside or outside the organization. Whilst we can agree that in the long term their needs overlap and indeed sometimes coincide, the reality of organizational life is such that in the short term they do not. Senior management, for example, need to be concerned with what they spend and what they get in return, and in the face of many competing demands, may focus more on what they can measure easily. It’s also quite common that they lack the detailed knowledge necessary (a problem exacerbated if they don’t recognize the limitations of their knowledge) to clearly understand the long-term value of learning and development. Organizational politics may also play a part. Senior managers may have a need to ‘look good’ in front of others, restricting their enthusiasm for longer term, risky issues such as people development. The pressure for results is also felt further down the organization, making the achievement of departmental goals on time and within budget a priority for middle managers and team leaders to achieve, leaving less room for the important but less urgent tasks such as people development. The individual focus and competitive nature of some departmental units may also mean that peers feel that supporting others in their learning efforts may detract from achievement of their own goals. Finally, those consultants on whom organizations depend for advice and direction may be limited in what they can offer, choosing to do what they know, rather than (really) knowing what they do.

In addition to ‘not being a learning organization’ two other organizational-level factors may work against the transfer and maintenance of new learning from training and development initiatives. The first of these is the organization’s culture, while the second, perhaps not unrelated, is the extent of political behaviour and use of power that exists.
Organization Culture

Frameworks to characterize organization culture have been described by many authors. While in-depth treatment of their content is not appropriate here, culture tends to be defined within these frameworks in terms of a number of recurring dimensions. For example Harrison (1972) describes four orientations towards power, the role, the task and the person respectively while Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983) place the emphases on the four areas of support, innovation, rules and goals.

Given organizations’ concern with developing and maintaining appropriate cultures it makes sense to have a look at what features of an organization’s culture might help or hinder the application of new learning. A good checklist for looking at how cultures are maintained is provided by Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman (1992). Whatever the framework used, they suggest five mechanisms, all of which can have implications for the promotion and use of learning within the organization:

1. what managers pay attention to, measure and control;

2. the ways in which managers (particularly top management) react to critical incidents and organizational crises;

3. managerial role modelling, teaching and coaching;

4. criteria for allocating rewards and status;

5. criteria for recruitment, selection, promotion and removal from the organization.

Depending on the culture of the organization, different signals can be sent out to indicate what’s seen as important. If it values learning, then the importance of people development, for example, will be apparent in its performance management processes and in the rewards (such as promotion) for managers who do it well. Similarly, should a crisis arise, such as a major slowdown in business, whether the organization starts making people redundant straight away or starts to consider other opportunities in order to retain them might also indicate something about the value it places on its human resources. On the other hand, in strongly task or goal-oriented cultures, for instance, managers must ensure that organizational objectives such as project deadlines and milestones are met on time and within budgets. This, according to Quinn
and Rohrbaugh, competes directly with their role in managing the efforts of a range of people and their responsibility to ensure that the talents of those people are developed for the benefit of themselves and the organization.

**Power and Politics**

It's also reasonable to assume that there is a relationship between the culture of the organization and where power is distributed in that organization. Thus in task and goal-focused cultures, it is likely that greater power will be in the hands of those who are seen to be good at 'getting the job done', with less emphasis on how they actually do so. Similarly, in people-focused cultures, where personal development is a key feature, those who have a reputation for developing effective teams and who communicate well will find it easier to rise to positions of particular influence. It's hard to be precise about how this affects learning transfer, but evidence from Chapter 4 indicates that work environments (which are often, though not always, strongly influenced by the dominant organizational culture) that inhibit learning transfer are those where work overload and a focus on short-term goals mitigate against people finding the time to reflect on and experiment with new learning.

The ways in which the use (or indeed abuse) of power can affect learning transfer tend to be in the areas of access to knowledge, control over resources and power in decision making (Daft 1992). Thus if the person in a position of power takes the view that the less knowledge is shared, the better for their position, then knowledge will not be shared. If they feel resources that are needed to manage the transfer of knowledge around the organization could better be used elsewhere, then knowledge will not be transferred. Decisions made on these issues will have important implications for transfer.

**Local Resistance**

At a more local level, resistance to application of learning can come from a number of sources. In the same way as we saw earlier that support can come from managers, peers and the organization, so it is with resistance. We’ll look at each of these now.

**THE UNHELPFUL MANAGER**

Perhaps the most important influence outside of individuals themselves is their manager. The extent to which individuals get neutral or negative responses
from their manager when applying skills learned in training can have a
significant effect. As seen in Chapter 4, for those managers who are considered
unsupportive, their behaviour can perhaps be placed in one of two categories
– indifference or active resistance. Indifference is perhaps more common. Some
managers are indifferent to the development of skills (other than technical
skills) in general, especially from formal training, coming as they may from the
‘old school’ of management, or perhaps from a background that is more used
to dealing in certainties and tangible outcomes. Their reaction to participants
returning from a programme may just be to ignore it, not asking how they got
on or how the learning might be used. Or if they feel a little uncomfortable,
perhaps even a little threatened, they may make fun of ‘business school’ ideas.
It’s also not unusual for managers to have their own priorities, which may
conflict with those of the participants. Sometimes they may feel a sense of loss
of control resulting from application of new learning and ideas that are not
their own. Their response might be to keep tight control on things themselves,
restricting the amount of involvement or feedback, or in extreme cases taking
new ideas from the participant and passing them off as their own. Overall, these
barriers can have several net effects. Firstly, there is a loss to the workplace of
new knowledge, skills and attitudes through managers not supporting their
maintenance and development. Secondly, this in turn can reduce the motivation
to transfer, as prospects of success will start to seem further away. Thirdly, a
significant amount of energy is wasted in trying to bypass these managers,
energy which could be put to more productive use.

Indeed people can be very inventive when they need to find a way around
these barriers. A quite common strategy is to ‘sidestep’ the manager in question,
although this is perhaps easier to do in areas where shift working is in operation,
and participants might actually have more than one boss. Another strategy,
recommended by time management gurus everywhere is to act first and report
after the event, based on the premise that it’s easier to beg forgiveness than to
seek permission!

THE UNHELPFUL PEERS

Peers can also be indifferent or indeed resistant. One of the main reasons this
might happen is where personality or work styles differ markedly. However,
a competitive environment such as a sales environment may also encourage
peers to compete against each other in the interests of overall unit performance.
While this can have positive effects, it can also contribute to a climate of mistrust,
where others’ motives for helping might be seen as suspect. Environments
such as this also are characterized by a lack of interdependency, which further reduces the need for collaboration.

THE UNHELPFUL WORK ENVIRONMENT

We also saw in Chapter 4 that when discussing the organizational climate for learning transfer, more barriers than facilitators are typically identified. The evidence certainly suggests that resistance to change in the work environment plays a role in influencing transfer, and that the role of the manager (for good or ill) is a central one. There can be an enormous difference in the climate created by (sometimes) young, dynamic managers and staff with new ideas on the one hand, and (sometimes) older, more settled, more traditional managers and staff on the other. Environments managed by the latter tend not to have either a broad or a long-term outlook, whereas the former can be a rich source of new ideas and enthusiasm for change. Such work environments have been described in studies by Peters and O’Connor (1980) and Clarke (2002). Investigation of their collective resistance to change and its effects suggests that it tends to revolve
around a number of key fears, particularly, though not exclusively, held by managers at all levels in these environments. There is a belief that:

**Managers’ responsibility is being eroded**  Fears expressed in this regard tend to reflect a concern that a ‘new style of managing’ (that is, less directive and more participative) will result in a diminution of the influence of those with responsibility for managing others. Managers with this point of view are likely to value experience (if gained over a long number of years, so much the better) over innovation or creativity, and place a strong emphasis on position within the organization.

**Management is becoming too complicated**  It’s also common to find perceptions in some quarters that management is becoming too complicated, with perhaps too much attention being given to the feelings and aspirations of staff members (a people-oriented environment) instead of concentrating on the tasks to be done (a task-oriented environment).

**Managers aren’t being allowed to manage**  The fears and concerns already described above by the managers also manifest themselves in a concern that their own skills and abilities might not count as much in the future.

Overall, some or all of the above conditions could combine to generate the fears expressed. It is true that the world of management has undergone significant change in a relatively short space of time, with new structures, changing roles, higher levels of accountability and greater use of technology. The impact of this growing burden on those who might already feel less able to cope could well be to react defensively against it in order to maintain their self-efficacy and not ‘show themselves up’, manifesting itself in their lack of enthusiasm for change.

**FACILITATING CHANGE**

On the other side of the coin, experience has demonstrated that a number of conditions in the work environment will, if they exist, balance the transfer-inhibiting effects of the type of work climate just described. Within work environments, resistance to transfer can be overcome by:

**Openness**  A regular flow of information in all directions will ensure people are better placed to cope with changes in the way of working brought about by, among other things, the application of new learning.
Communication and meetings  The demonstration of openness through the involvement of staff in meetings and decisions affecting them lowers resistance to change, and improves the flow of new ideas. Frequent one-to-one meetings and availability of managers to discuss change issues are also contributing factors.

Using experience  The most change-oriented environments use the experience of all the members of staff, and manage to develop more of a ‘team spirit’.

In Practice

As the reasons for resistance to learning transfer are many and varied, so too are the ways in which this resistance might be overcome.

ENCOURAGE BUY-IN AT APPROPRIATE LEVELS

This instruction has probably become something of a cliché over the years. Yet despite the exhortations, far too many training and development initiatives are developed and implemented in isolation from the running of the business. The levels we’re talking about may be at participant level, at manager/supervisor level, and at senior manager level where the initiative might be likely to have organization-wide implications. We can look at each in turn.

At participant level  We have already seen some implications for learning transfer of the involvement of participants in the identification of learning needs and programme content where appropriate. Any consultation undertaken at this level will pay dividends later on.

At manager/supervisor level  The importance of their role has been highlighted in Chapter 4. People at this level need to be involved throughout the entire learning process. Their input can be valuable at the training needs assessment stage. It is also important that they meet with the participant before the programme to discuss desired learning outcomes and how they might be used. They also need to meet afterwards, to begin implementation of the action plan and provide coaching, feedback and support.

At senior management level  There may be a need to reinforce the message that a particular learning intervention is trying to promote. Senior managers can send out strong messages (sometimes inadvertently) about what’s seen as important.
They should channel this influence and be role models for the change.

MAKE A BUSINESS CASE FOR THE INTERVENTION

Learning and development interventions are in effect change interventions. Therefore guidelines for best practice in change management should apply. One of the most critical is that the change is seen to be necessary. As far as possible, the need should be expressed in business terms. Even if this can’t be quantified in financial terms, at least some indication of the expected effects on organizational performance should be described.

ADOPT ADULT LEARNING PRINCIPLES

It’s true that many people in the workforce do not have fond memories of being in classrooms. Mention training to them and these memories come flooding back – learning things they can’t see the point of, and trying to remember things they’d much sooner forget. One way of easing this trauma is to use a learning process that makes use of what they already know, and build on it by using their own experience. The value of using adult learning principles was discussed in Chapter 2, and the benefits of a constructivist approach to learning have been demonstrated in the literature. The use of this approach can play an important part in decreasing resistance and demonstrating that learning can happen in many, non-threatening ways.

TREAT THE ORGANIZATION’S LEARNING DISABILITIES

Many organizations have what can be regarded as ‘organizational learning disabilities’, characteristics of the organization that make it difficult to see what learning opportunities exist, but also what learning opportunities they may be missing. Garvin (2000) cites three principal disabilities – biased information; flawed interpretation of that information; and inaction. Any of these will inhibit the spread of real information that can be used for learning throughout the organization.

Summary

As with change of any description, using applications of new learning to bring about change in the workplace can have its difficulties. Old habits may have to be broken and real or imagined fears allayed. Even where the relevant stakeholders are in agreement regarding the need, they may differ strongly in their view as to how that need should be met. Issues such as the culture of the
organization, the location of power and the action of influential individuals can work for or against the transfer of learning throughout that organization. It’s probably true that work environments don’t actually exhibit outright resistance to transfer, but it does seem from the evidence that many of them exhibit a high level of indifference to it. Perhaps this is a demonstration of the difference between espoused theory (Argyris, 1982), in which organizations acknowledge that training is a good thing; and their theory in use, where in actuality they do nothing active to facilitate its transfer to the workplace.

References


