



The Role of CEOs and Managers in Improving Training Effectiveness.

Dr Clive Hunter

The competencies of the people in your organisation and their motivation to apply these competencies in the work situation are keys to achieving competitive advantage. Very few managers would disagree with this statement but there is mounting evidence that training and development programmes often do not result in improved employee and organisational performance and much time, money and effort is wasted by ineffective training. This is not necessarily because the training techniques used do not result in learning but because in many cases the learners do not apply what they have learned. For example, Newstrom (1986) quotes a survey conducted by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) which found that 40% of what the trainees had learned was applied immediately after training, 25% was being applied after six months and only 15% after one year. More recently, Ford and Weissbein (1997) reviewed 20 studies on training transfer (the application of what is learned) and found that,

“There is a growing recognition of the transfer problem in organizational training as concerns are raised that much of what is trained fails to be applied in the work setting. This concern has become even stronger given today’s changing job requirements, the view of people as the key to competitive advantage, and the movement towards learning as a key mechanism for fully utilising human resources.”

Also, Holton, Bates and Ruona (2000: 334) state that, “...although the exact amount of transfer is unknown, the transfer problem is believed to be so pervasive that there is rarely a learning-performance situation in which such a problem doesn’t exist.”

In 2003 I decided to investigate this problem and interviewed 60 Chief Executive Officers of South African companies and 254 of their managers. On average, the managers estimated that about 40% of what employees learned off the job and about 60% of what they learned on the job was applied by them immediately after training. These results support the ASTD study but it should be kept in mind that the percentages quoted are averages and there was a fairly large range in the estimates. Some of the managers estimated that a high percentage of what was learned was transferred while others estimated a very low percentage. The obvious question is why is it that the transfer is high in some cases and low in others? Also, what do CEOs and managers need to do to ensure that learners apply what they learn?

The results of my study showed that the extent to which the middle-level managers were involved in training was statistically very significantly related to the level of motivation of the employees to learn and apply what they learned. Furthermore, aspects of the employees’ motivation were very significantly related to company performance. It is clear that the more the managers are involved in both on-the-job and off-the-job training, the more the employees will be motivated to learn and apply what they learn and this is likely to have a positive impact on company performance. (28% of the variation in company performance was explained by three aspects of employee motivation to learn: the learning effort applied by the trainees, their determination to try their best during training, and the extent to which they ask for help and are helped by their managers.)

Typically, managers became involved in training in the following ways:

THE ROLE OF THE MANAGERS PRIOR TO TRAINING

The managers determined the main areas in the organisation where training was needed to improve company performance.

They then helped their subordinates in these areas to determine their specific training needs. A significant finding of the study is that the more management are aware of the training needs of their company and their employees, the more positive they (the managers) are about training and the more involved they become. In order to determine individual training needs, managers should have a clear understanding of the skills and knowledge requirements for each job as well as the actual skills and knowledge that their employees possess. The difference is referred to as the training gap. The training gap can be determined by carrying out job analyses to define the required skills and knowledge while the employees' actual skills and knowledge can be assessed by performance appraisals and tests.

They discussed the alternative training programmes with their subordinates and together they decided on the most suitable programme. In this way the managers and their subordinates became conversant with the content of the programmes / courses.

They stressed to the subordinates the importance of learning new competencies and applying them in the work situation.

The managers encouraged their subordinates to learn and to set learning and performance goals.

They allowed them to take time off for learning.

They made arrangements in the workplace to replace the learners while they were involved in training.

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THE ROLE OF THE MANAGERS DURING TRAINING

They attended the introductory session of the training course with their subordinates where possible.

The managers sometimes ran the courses themselves.

They often attended the closing session of the course.

THE ROLE OF THE MANAGERS AFTER TRAINING

The managers discussed the training with their subordinates to determine what they had actually learned and to find out if there were any problems with the training.

They stressed the achievement of performance goals.

They measured performance.

The managers ensured that the learners had the tools, equipment and the opportunity to apply what they had learned.

They monitored their subordinates' performance in relation to the new competencies and helped them when necessary to overcome any problems.

They coached them on an on-going basis. (This applied to both on-the-job and off-the-job training).

They allowed them enough time to practice what they had learned.

In general, the managers were committed to making sure that the training was effective.

THE ROLE OF THE CEO IN THE TRAINING PROCESS

My research found that, in the companies where training was effective, the CEOs tended to incorporate training and development into their strategic thinking. Also, they became involved in the determination of training needs and monitored the training on a regular basis. Furthermore, they ensured that training budgets were established and that the effectiveness of the training was evaluated.

The results clearly support that CEOs should encourage their managers to become involved in training. They could do this by making it clear that their managers are directly responsible for training in their departments and by incorporating this responsibility or Key Performance Area into Management by Objectives, performance appraisal or performance management programmes. In addition, the managers could be trained in the management of training where necessary and rewarded appropriately for achieving challenging training goals.

The study showed a significant correlation between CEOs' attitudes to training and their managers' attitudes to training but the question arises as to how CEOs can influence their managers' attitudes in practice. According to Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), people's attitudes can be changed by addressing their beliefs and this is done by providing relevant information. CEOs can therefore bring about changes in their managers' attitudes by providing them with information such as the organisation's strategic plans, the need for training in the light of those plans, specific training goals, training policies, procedures and the funds available for training. This communication could be done in their day-to-day dealings with their managers and more formally in management meetings. A number of

the CEOs who were interviewed included training on the agendas of their monthly management meetings and used this opportunity to articulate their strategies, policies, procedures and attitudes relating to training.

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