



The manager's role in the transfer of learning to the workplace

Helen McPhun

We train people so they will learn. The reason we want people to learn is so they will change a behaviour or perform a certain way. Surprisingly, little emphasis is placed on ensuring learning occurs in the training and even more surprisingly, little importance is placed on making sure learning transfers across to improve performance on the job. Is there a missing link somewhere between the conception of the training idea, the delivery of the training intervention and the return back to work?

Without a platform or a process to help recently trained employees actually apply their new learning at work, the money spent on the training is wasted. The transfer of learning to the workplace is critical and yet it is often totally disregarded. The link to performance improvement is nowhere to be seen. Think of how many courses you or your colleagues have completed after which you have had every intention of using the new skills or knowledge, only to find you never quite get around to it. You still have the binder or the notes or the thoughts but, alas, you do nothing with them.

There are numerous obstacles that marginalise the transfer of learning for newly trained employees. Even though participants finished the training ready to change, in many instances it is easier to revert back to the old way when they get back to their roles. And...there is usually no consequence for doing so except, perhaps, to be signed up to the same course next year.

"Bandaïd" solutions are prevalent in many places - train them, test them and set them free: a quick recipe for an ineffective training strategy that ultimately wastes the precious resource of time and we all know time costs money.

Quality learning comes from top notch training that is designed to meet organisational goals and to produce measurable results. Measuring learning is a skill and must reflect the level of complexity

that is required to help the employee transfer the skills and knowledge to their role.

Transferring Learning

Let's assume the training was excellent and the learning was measured. What structure is in place to help the employee transfer that learning to their job? More importantly, who is responsible for this, and, what role do managers play?

The workplace climate can greatly affect the transfer of learning. If staff are dismissive about training, trainers are poorly respected, or topics are seen as irrelevant, this inspires no confidence or desire on the part of the learner to actually apply their learning at work. There are numerous things that can be done to promote a better learning culture and the responsibility of this does not fall with one person.

If a learner returns to work to find all their colleagues using the old method or the wrong method, the learner is unlikely to be the odd one out by using a different process. It is disheartening and alarming for newly trained employees to do a task the way they have been trained when no one else does it that way and their own manager or supervisor does not role model expected performance.

If the manager has not used an informed approach to make sure the employee is completing the right training to produce measurable results then the manager really

doesn't know what to look for when the employee returns from training. Many managers send staff for training in the hope that the trainer's magic will rectify the staff member's performance issues.

In your place of work, what are the consequences for employees who do not apply what has been taught in a training session or does anyone even know? There are numerous skills and knowledge components that employees are taught in training that are seldom checked on the job to see if the learning transfer occurred. Where knowledge and skill relates to easily measured tasks that are frequently checked it is easy to see learning transfer gaps. When these are identified, what are the consequences or the actions taken?

What should or could a manager's role be in bridging the transfer of learning to improved performance for newly trained staff? Do managers take an active or passive role when learners return from training?

Oftentimes employees learn concepts and theory in their training, which they have trouble transferring to the reality of their workplace. They may lack the confidence to apply new techniques or knowledge back at work, or lack the experience and practice with the better, newly learned, processes, sometimes they need to relearn how to juggle multiple new skill and knowledge requirements in an efficient manner in order to function in their work day.

It seems, in some workplaces, employees are 'sent off to get fixed' by training. When they return no one checks. Surely managers have a key role in managing the newly trained employee to apply what is learnt and perform.

There are workplaces where a trainee returns from training and the manager and colleagues encourage the employee to use the new skills and knowledge. Where workmates are supportive and where senior management actually knows what training is occurring. In this instance learning would certainly be transferred into performance improvement.

The key to making learning stick is to encourage employees who have been trained to apply what they have learned. They also need to be measured to see that they are applying the knowledge and skills the correct way in the right contexts. It is not just the trainee's responsibility to transfer learning to work.

The manager must promote and encourage an environment that supports the application of the new learning. This may include team members sharing what they have learnt in a team meeting. The colleagues must also be onboard to contribute to a positive learning culture. Each person must be role modelling what the trainee has been taught.

Where the learning is not transferred to the workplace there should be consequences. Those consequences should not be sending the same person off to a similar course, but rather include learning application goals and targets to be achieved within reasonable timeframes.

Where senior managers are approving the training spend of other managers and supervisors, they need to check that there is a return on this training spend.

The requirements to provide a bridge from training to learning and then from learning

to improved performance is upheld by multiple players. A learning culture is grown from within by everyone and not dictated as the new initiative from HR, OD or senior managers. A learning culture provides a bridge for newly trained employees which encourages them to apply their learning on the job and measures whether the learning has improved their performance. ■

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