



“Our Training Program Is Working... I Think” What Learning and Development Professionals Need to Know

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Learning and development professionals are responsible for implementing training programs that teach the relevant skills employees need to be successful in their jobs. However, even when training appears to be relevant, gaps in skills application may occur, which can lead to persistent performance problems. The problems may not be related to the training itself; something may have gotten “lost in translation.” Training assessments can help evaluate these skills application gaps and performance problems to support effective decision making about how to enhance training and development programs to improve performance.

This article is the third in a series of four to help you get the most out of your training assessments. Training should be part of a comprehensive performance improvement solution. However, it is up to learning and development professionals to periodically evaluate the effectiveness of training programs and training delivery format to ensure employees continually build their skills, feel more empowered to act and can easily translate training into improved performance in the workplace.

Applying the five principles outlined in the first article in this series (May, 2010) will help learning and development professionals conduct an effective training assessment and foster the level of stakeholder support and participation necessary to ensure the training assessment provides the actionable results needed to enhance training and development programs.

1) Align Purpose with Situation — Training Application Involves More Than Just Training Delivery.

Training programs won’t improve performance if employees cannot easily apply the training in the workplace. The problem is not usually with the training itself, but with challenges in the organization that may not support efficient skills application. Therefore, training assessments should be designed to examine more than just training satisfaction, relevance and skills application levels; they should explore the interrelationships between other components that support training application, such as empowerment, management support and expectations, systems and processes, and performance management systems. It is essential to include performance metrics that are important to management, which will highlight linkages between training, skills application and work performance.

Training assessments should be conducted as either confidential or anonymous assessments to foster candid participant responses, and employees should be informed of this, as well as the disposition of the data and the format in which the assessment results will be presented. The assessment should include quantitative ranking questions and a limited number of open-ended questions to explore the issues and challenges employees face in applying their skills. However, keep in mind with large participant groups, open-ended questions may generate a considerable amount of information that will increase the effort required for analysis and reporting.

2) Context Is Key — Something Happened on the Way to the Job.

Most employees leave training with great intentions and attempt to apply their new skills immediately upon returning to work. However, they may face challenges with many of the other components described in #1 and, after a period of unsuccessful application, may eventually return to pre-training work behavior. Without understanding the challenges employees face in applying new skills or making changes to create a more supportive organizational environment, continuing to deliver the same training will minimally improve performance.

Example: Two years post-training, an information technology organization conducted a follow-up project management (PM) training assessment. Results indicated the skills application levels for most PM activities were lower than the initial pre-training baseline assessment; however, the baseline assessment did not examine the other components important for training application. Training was relevant, but employees were having difficulty applying their new skills because of inconsistent tools and processes, lack of resource control, conflicting project priorities and inconsistent management expectations. The organization developed a plan to enhance its training program and address the challenges. Without assessing these additional components, the organization could have concluded that the training had been ineffective.

3) Not All Assessments Are Created Equal — Focus on Participation and Validation.

As discussed in the first article in the series, assessment instruments should exhibit strong reliability and validity (i.e., consistently measure what they are supposed to measure); however, even a well-designed, sound assessment can fail without adequate participation.

Full participation (100 percent) is not usually necessary. Prior to the start of the assessment, it is important to determine the appropriate participant sample size needed to achieve high confidence in the assessment findings. The same holds true for the management sample for validating employee self-responses and performance outcomes. If a large sample is needed, more frequent communications, participant incentives and other motivational techniques may be necessary to encourage high response rates. Also, executive sponsor participation is critical to help achieve adequate manager participation.

4) Achieve Active Support and Communication – The Critical Success Factor.

A critical success factor for any assessment is: communication, communication, communication. Participants and managers should be informed about the assessment before, during and after to ensure the assessment achieves its intended results. Communications should be frequent and include communications to participants and managers from the assessment lead and from the senior executive championing the assessment.

Participants must feel that their time and input are valued and understand how their input will be used to make a difference in the organization. Leaders and managers must perceive the assessment as valuable, take the time to participate and encourage employee participation. Shortly after completion, assessment findings should be presented to employees and managers with a solid approach for performance improvement; participants want to feel that their time spent was worth it.

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5) Establish WIIFE (What's In It for Everyone) – Feel Confident About Your Training and Development Program.

Training assessments help learning and development professionals feel more confident their training and development programs are meeting the needs of stakeholders: Employees are receiving the training and support they need in the appropriate format (classroom, applied workshops, mentoring, etc.) to foster efficient skills application, and leaders and managers are aware of how to create an environment that effectively supports, encourages and rewards skills application to achieve performance outcomes. Unfortunately, when performance does not seem to improve post-training, the blame may fall reflexively upon the training and development program. Training assessments help uncover the real issues and, without this valuable information, the only other alternative to address performance problems will be to use a strategy consisting of anecdotal improvement recommendations with hit-or-miss results.

The next article will focus on why employees should welcome training assessments and should participate fully to help enhance their training programs and impact changes in the organizational environment that will support their new skills application and improved performance.

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