

How to turn learning's/trainings into sustainable behavioural change

Like most of you I have participated in a number of training programs and seminars over the years. They have all been very good. They have all had excellent trainers and faculty members. Upon leaving the training session I felt very good about myself. Upon reflection months after I always had to admit to myself that not much, if anything had changed. Then I spoke to other people and they have all had similar experiences. I have spent the last 18 months looking at this in detail and in the following I will describe a situation that is the norm. This norm however is not helpful when it comes to sustainable learning. The good news is that there is another way.

This other way, as I see it, is based on three things. Relatively new Neuroscience and Bioengineering research from Prof John Medina. Human behavioural studies into Learning from Prof Donald Fitzpatrick, and research and studies that I participated in during my time at Ashridge Business School, into Behavioural Learning.

Many business leaders, be it line management or human resources that I have been in contact with the last months are talking about the challenges they are facing over the coming years. There are signs that we are getting out of the financial crises, which is a positive thing. They also speak about the necessity to do things differently, "in order to make sure we do not repeat past mistakes". In other words, that equals changing the way we do things i.e. changing our behaviour. That is often very difficult for us as people. There is help though, and this is where the aforementioned experts can assist.

Changing our behaviour takes on average plus/minus 6 months, IF actively worked on. Changing our behaviour requires "rewiring our memory" (John Medina). He puts it relatively simply: First work on your short-term memory by repeating to remember. Then rewire the long-term memory by remembering to repeat.

The majority of all today's training do not address this and do not help people to achieve it. Training or learning over the last few years and still today, are typically a three to five day training course, and then... back to the office. (!!)

These seminars are typically held away from the office environment. The seminars introduce new models to the participants, and the participant gets time to practice each of these models. Then another model is introduced and then another etc. This is done "because we need to get as much into the program as we can. We only have a few days and working with many models is the best investment". This is however the worst investment. The participants do not have enough time and cannot digest, let alone work with it all. Furthermore it is rarely tied directly to their immediate business need and concerns.

These courses however are creating a good atmosphere amongst the participants, and typically there is some sort of celebration towards the end of the course. People generally feel good about themselves. The quality of the seminar is measured via a feedback form at the end of the course. The result is always very good. The number of times I have spoken to people and heard “this is the best course ever” is by now countless. Unfortunately the learning is not sustainable.

Now meet Donald Kirkpatrick and his four levels of learning.

Level 1: Reaction: To what degree participants react favourably to training. The quality of the training is evaluated by feedback forms a.k.a. “smile-sheets”. These smile sheets give the immediate reaction regarding emotional connection to the coach or trainer, other participants etc. They say very little about the quality of the training, and it say NOTHING about the quality of later behavioural changes. ROI is impossible to calculate, estimates show that it is negative. Less than a month after the training very little has changed. When checking with participants after one month, over 90% of the content is forgotten “It is so difficult to do it with all the daily work”.

Level 2: Learning: To what degree participants acquire the intended knowledge, skills, attitudes, confidence, and commitment based on their learning exercise. This is training where people learn a specific skill. This could be project management or the latest SAP-training, or new accounting guidelines. These learnings are tested and there are certain criteria that has to be met in order to pass the test. These learning’s are solidified when back at the workplace, since the people immediately must use it. Repeat to remember!!!! ROI is generally positive.

Level 3: Behaviour: To what degree participants apply what they learned when they are back on the job? In most of today’s leadership development programs, and most certainly the ones I have participated in, a lot is said about “changing the mind-set”. That is a good thing but is not enough and it rarely helps, since it is not leading to behavioural changes. This is because it is not repeatedly used, and then we forget. I propose that behavioural learning is centred on current or immediate future business issues. The start is a two-to three-day session and then in subsequent months follow-up trainings take place in a known work environment, e.g. the office. Learning in the office is much more effective for behavioural changes. Our Brain can better retrieve information that is acquired in a know environment (John Medina). Since the learning is centred on current business issues, it is automatic that the learning’s are repeated all the time. ROI of this approach is highly positive, AND is has a huge ripple effect throughout the organisation. What I have learned when implementing this is that the CFO`s love it. Not only because of

the promised ROI, but because the up front investment is generally lower than what they have been spending so far.

Level 4: Results: To what degree targeted outcomes occur as a result of the learning and subsequent reinforcement. This is the PhD in learning's and behavioural changes, AND this is what all companies, in my opinion, should aspire to reach. It starts with each individual being clear about HOW and which behavioural changes impact the bottom line. And it starts with what bottom line results we want to reach. "Within eight months we need to have a customer retention rate of 75%". From that, derive what is necessary to achieve it from a behavioural point of view and what team interactions are necessary.

I here think about Twain`s often-mentioned definition of insanity:

'Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.'

So if you are in the same situation as many business leaders that I have spoken to the last several months, I suggest that you rework the way that leadership development and training is done within your organisation. It sounds almost too good to be true when I say invest less, or at least differently, and get more. It is true. If you are currently relying on classic training seminars you are getting a negative ROI. Change the way this is done and your ROI become positive. It is tried and tested and it works. It is different and therefore not the safe bet and you do not have an immediate response from a smile sheet about how the people feel. I encourage you to test within your own organisation, starting with yourself, and ask the question.

What am I using in my daily work from the last training seminar I participated in? The answer you get will tell you if it is time to do things differently in order to get different results.

Looking forward to hearing from you and talking about how I/we can be of most help to you with the challenges that You are facing right now.