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Managers: Close The Gap Between Learning and Doing

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2014 has been an exciting year for the corporate world. With the recession in the rear-view mirror for most organizations, mindsets and spending have shifted. One example of this newfound 'growth mindset' is an increased investment in the training and development of our people.

As spending increases, so should our accountability for results. With over \$130 billion spent on employee training worldwide in the last year¹, there is a higher and higher bar for the return required on investment in our people.

We all know that we need to move our focus beyond simply acquiring knowledge; success in training is about the *application* of new knowledge and skills—it's about behaviour change. Unfortunately, right now we are failing in this mission: only

10-20% of what people learn in a training session is transferred back to the workplace². The reason? Recent research shows us that there is a distinction between a 'motivation to learn' and a 'motivation to transfer'³, and while most organizations are good at tapping into the first source of motivation, the second is often left unaddressed.

Drawing on my 20+ years of experience in the corporate training world, I debunk two common fallacies surrounding what it takes to tap into this 'motivation to transfer'—and highlight a strategy that we use at PCI to close the 'gap' between learning and doing, and ensure successful application of the knowledge gained in learning events.

THE TRUTH ABOUT LEARNING TRANSFER

FALLACY #1 *What an employee brings to his or her own development is the most important element in determining whether training will be transferred to the workplace.*

THE TRUTH It's indisputable that employees bring a lot to their own development and they need to own this. However, when it comes to ensuring sustained behaviour change, research shows that there is an even more crucial determinant: managers. Once trainees return from a workshop, as long as they have the time and resources to apply their training, the single most important factor in learning transfer is manager support⁴.

In the *International Journal of Training and Development*, Chiaburu and Lindsay explain how the 'motivation to learn' and the 'motivation to transfer' are two separate constructs³.

We see this distinction every day in people who come out of a program giving it rave reviews, excited by what they have learned—and yet fail to apply it. We are all guilty of it ourselves from time to time—no matter how deeply the facilitator's stories resonated with us or how inspired the workshop left us feeling.

While the instructor and workshop designer work together to build skills and impart a motivation to learn, managers need to be involved in the training process in order to create an environment that supports the 'motivation to transfer' these skills back onto the job—an environment where upper management demonstrates the value they see in their employees' training sessions and where there is ample opportunity to develop and hone new skills in the workplace.

So—managers can make or break the transfer of knowledge and skill—but, do they know this?

FALLACY #2 *Managers know they need to be a part of the process and therefore they will be.*

THE TRUTH Most managers are smart, talented individuals who genuinely want to see their people succeed. They know that they are a vital part of the learning process—in fact, just over 70% of managers surveyed worldwide in a study on the transfer of training reported that managerial support is to be 'expected' in any training and development initiative⁴.

Despite the support from the majority, the same survey revealed that less than 25% of managers hold pre and post workshop discussions with their employees, and, of those that did hold conversations, their people ranked the discussions as 'average' at best⁴. What accounts for this gap between knowing what to do and actually doing it?

Most managers tell us it's *time*. Managers are faced with increased demands on their level of performance as well as their peoples' levels of performance. With only so much time and energy, urgent tasks are treated as priorities and often end up consuming the better part of their day. As much as managers want to help their employees, time can slip away from them. Sound familiar?

In addition, no time is spent equipping managers with the tools that they need to hold successful conversations; it is just expected that they are experts and will intuitively know how to provide this kind of support. Taken together, the time crunch experienced by managers and the perceived effort involved in preparing for conversations before and after workshops results in a significant gap between intentions and actions.

The good news is that closing the gap is not as hard as it seems. At PCI we have found that managers are more than willing to get involved in the coaching equation so long as it is a) made easy for them, and b) results in noticeable improvements in their people.

'MANAGER AS ALLY' MINDS THE GAP

One year ago we started testing our *Manager as Ally* (MAA) approach at PCI. Over the past year we have experimented with this approach at several of our long-term clients, and the results have been very heartening.

MAA is a structured process that 'wraps' around a learning event. It simplifies the coaching equation so that managers can be fully involved in their employees' development before and after a workshop with minimal effort. Through this process, we send the managers of participants in our workshops three e-mails at different points in their employees' progression through our training program. Each e-mail consists of a printable conversation guide and a link to a brief, but thorough video clip that demonstrates how to lead the discussion in the most impactful way possible.

Effectively, we ensure the timing of the conversations is clear and we eliminate all of the prep work for their meetings so they can focus on what matters most—the actual face-to-face time with their people. Results to date show that over 95% of participating managers chose to get involved in the development of their people through these coaching conversations.

At the start of the process, we were sceptical. Could three 10-15 minute conversations between an employee and their manager really help transfer skills? The proof is in the numbers: 100% of participating MAA managers reported that they were able to help their employees successfully transfer their skills to the workplace.

From the employees' standpoint, when asked what it was like to have their managers involved in the process, the response was overwhelmingly positive: 82% of participants found that having their managers involved in the process was 'helpful' in supporting the application of learning.

In fact, most employees' feedback echoed a very similar message: that their success was directly dependent on level of support they received from their manager. As one participant reported: "*For my [action] plan to be fully successful it was vital to know the degree to which my manager believed in this material and was prepared to support my efforts to use this approach with my team*"

AN END TO THE GAP

Undoubtedly, investing wisely in training extends well beyond the classroom; ensuring that employees are returning from training to an environment that will enable the use of new skills is a critical factor. If we are to close the gap for good, managers need to support their employees through the training process, and we need to support our managers in doing so.

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Notes

1. Josh Bersin. "Spending on Corporate Training Soars: Employee Capabilities Now a Priority," *Forbes*, 2 April 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2014/02/04/the-recovery-arrives-corporate-training-spend-skyrockets/>
2. Lorri Freifeld. "Transfer of Training: Moving Beyond the Barriers," *Training Magazine*, 6 April 2012, <http://www.trainingmag.com/content/transfer-training-moving-beyond-barriers>
3. Rebecca Grossman & Eduardo Salas. "The Transfer of Training: What Really Matters," *International Journal of Training and Development* 15, no. 2, 2011, <http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/matnat/ifi/INF3280/v14/pensumliste/additionalliterature/grossmansalas2011transfertraining.pdf>
4. ESI International. "Applying Training and Transferring Learning in the Workplace: Turning Hope into Reality," 2011, http://www.esi-intl.com/-/media/Files/Public-Site/US/Research-Reports/ESIUS_Applying-Training-Transferring-Learning-FULL-REPORT