

The business impact of training: Managers, it's in your hands

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Dr. Ina Weinbauer-Heidel and Masha Ibeschitz-Manderbach highlight the crucial role managers play in learning transfer.



'Employee training has got on my nerves for years already – and now there is this flood of online training!'

Many managers wouldn't admit it openly, but that's what many of them think. Unfortunately, they might have a point. All too often they experience this: the employee returns from training – or even many online learning events - and everything is the same as before. A waste of valuable time in the training room, while daily business had to carry on.

Research confirms this management disillusionment: in fact, only about 15% of what was learned in a seminar will be applied on the job.

What do managers expect from a good training programme? Quite simply: improved employee performance. And they consider training as a viable means for it, provided the following points are met:

- **Efficient use of time:** employees are not absent from their daily work any longer than absolutely necessary
- **Promise of performance:** the result must be performance improvement
- **Budget efficiency:** the cost is within a reasonable limit
- **Highest possible return on investment:** companies and employees get the best out of it

Is all this feasible? Research says: yes. It's possible in face-to-face training, in online training, in blended formats as well as in hybrid learning (meaning a combination of f2f and online learning). In every format, the manager of the participant has crucial influence on whether the training works. Numerous studies prove this.

The importance of leadership - a research example

Several years ago, American Express analysed the business impact of one of its central leadership programmes which they had carried out in a blended format.

The graduates were divided into a 'high improvement' group and a 'no improvement' group, based on the performance improvement of their respective teams (they measured KPIs such as lead times, income, sales, customer satisfaction, forecast accuracy and handling time).

The most glaring difference between the high and no improvement groups was the support that the graduates had received from their immediate management:

High performers had four times as many conversations with their superiors about how to apply what they had learned than those who had shown little or no performance increase.

Twice as many graduates in the high-improvement group also indicated that their manager had supported the training and that they expected positive outcomes from the application of what they had learnt.

The researchers' conclusion: the true impact of training is best predicted by the manager's commitment [1].

Six steps to make transfer a success

The failure of managers to promote and demand learning transfer, i.e. the application of what has been learned in the workplace, has long been the most frequently cited reason in transfer research why transfer fails [2]. Conversely, this also means that, as a manager, it's in your own hands to make the most of your employee's training. By the way, the required effort is surprisingly low.

What should you do? These are the six simple steps that managers take to get the most out of training:

Question the benefits for the business. When the decision for or against training is pending, ask: What is the benefit for our department? Clearly define what success for the company and the business impact of the training looks like. Be as specific as possible. Training aims to prepare the participants for certain behaviours in their daily business. Do you only approve training if you are convinced by the expected business impact? Do you reject training that doesn't promise clearly recognisable added value for your business?

Set goals together. What should be achieved from the implementation often is only defined by one party, either by the participant, HR or the trainer. In an increasingly complex environment, however, it is important that as a manager, you are involved in the decision making. A simple rule of thumb helps: basic training is usually an excellent choice to solve simple challenges. Complex challenges with high strategic relevance on the other hand deserve tailor-made, advanced and, above all, jointly developed implementation goals – and they usually need more than just a training programme.

Define the direction. Have a conversation with your employee a week or two before the training and clarify the following questions:

- **Goal and expectation:** What purpose should the training serve? What is the contribution to further progress for the company, the team and the employee themselves?
- **Focus:** Which content and topics covered in the training are therefore particularly relevant for your employee. Prepare well. Ask for the content of the training to be sent in advance and screen it.
- **Application:** Which concrete tasks, projects, situations etc cover the new skills and ideas to be implemented? Define this in detail. Your employee attends training for 'effective meetings'? Make sure your employee prepares and moderates the next team meeting.
- **Support:** What support does your employee need? Clarify what is possible and give reassurance of your support.
- **Follow up conversation:** Set the date for a post training conversation in advance, in which you will follow up on the points agreed and discussed.

Give the training significance. Show your employee that development is important. Enable learning to be trouble-free by instructing your employee to remove himself from day-to-day business as much as possible by organising cover.

When your employee has done this, respect it and don't bombard him with emails and calls during that time. But show interest, for example send a short message in the evening: 'How's it going? I'm looking forward to your ideas.' Ask about exciting learning, personal 'aha' experiences and first ideas occasionally, if it is a longer training programme.

Show your employee that you are expecting a lot from the training and what they make of it - may it be in a face-to-face session or in a (s)ynchronic online learning programme. Because if you think it's important, so does your employee.

Get the implementation rolling. Have a conversation with your employee immediately after the training, to clarify the following questions:

- How will I (as your manager) recognise during the next four weeks that the training has paid off – for the company, the team, our customers and yourself?
- What are the most important learnings from the training that you will share with your colleagues or your team, for example as a five to ten-minute input at the next team meeting?
- What insights and tools from the training would you recommend to me as your manager for my own development?
- Who in our environment (company, department, function etc) should you pass on the contents, methods and tools from the training?

Tip: Give the training insights a stage. Let employees present their key learning and implementation ideas at the next team meeting. Or, in a key insights meeting, they can bring a summary of the most useful learnings for all those interested in the organisation, or as a short video, an Intranet blog etc. This has several advantages: your employee reflects and focuses once again on the preparation of this pitch. Colleagues learn in a highly compressed and relevant form as part of organisational learning. They give appreciation and emphasis to the learned, because it gets a stage and is appreciated accordingly. If necessary, fellows can be found in the company. Finally, employee engagement and commitment increase, as they are the topic expert and pioneer and should therefore also represent the implementation success.

Monitor business impact. Do not allow good intentions and the steps agreed in the follow up meeting to slip. Let your employee know that you will continue to support and demand until the discussed business impact is visible.

Depending on your preference, you can reflect on the progress in scheduled short meetings: 'How is the implementation going?' Or by requesting: 'Please send me an email with a short status update of the implementation every two weeks.'

It is crucial that you stick to it and show that the training attendance alone is not enough; but first of all the successful implementation and then the resulting benefits for our department and our organisation are the goal of every training.

Keep an eye on this: as a manager, your job is not to 'chase' the employee for its implementation – most of the application in everyday work continues to be their own responsibility.

However, as a manager you can make a massive contribution to the business impact of training if you communicate your attitude and your interest in the implementation positively and are actually open to noticing, tracking, appreciating and even demanding positive development.

Training – now effective

Stop frustration after training, because the effect fizzles out. By following the above six steps you create the best conditions for effective training transfer. You actively influence the training process, prove to your employees that their further development is important to you and ensure the application in everyday work.

All this is as time-saving as possible and with a focus on high impact for the employee, department and company. So, next time an employee comes to you with the request to approve training: take the first step (see above) and relax. You know what to do.

About the authors

Dr. Ina Weinbauer-Heidel is the founder of the [Institute for Transfer Effectiveness](#) and Masha Ibeschitz-Manderbach is Chief Transfer Enabler at the Institute for Transfer Effectiveness.

References and tools

[1] Leone, P. (2008): *Take your ROI to level 6. Training Industry Quarterly, Spring 2008*

[2] Foxon, M. (1993): *A process approach to the transfer of training. Part 1: The impact of motivation and supervisor support on transfer maintenance. Australian Journal of Educational Technology, 9(2), 130-143.*

Further tools and tips to help you with efficient training can be found in the book "What Makes Training Really Work – The 12 Levers of Transfer Effectiveness" Weinbauer-Heidel, I., Ibeschitz, M. (2016). Tredition. Or in the [Transfer Insider Box](#)