

The Myth of Soft-Skills Training:

by James C. Georges

Why is it so tough to show concrete results from soft-skills training courses? Maybe it's because no training really happens.

Suppose you wanted to become skillful at something. Anything. Golf, karate, selling refrigerators, negotiating, making presentations, being a "leader" instead of just a manager - whatever. The point is, you want to become truly proficient. Your objective is not just to know something about the thing; you want to be able to do the thing, and do it well. Would you:

- Read a book?
- Watch a video?
- Hire a motivational speaker?
- Attend a seminar?
- Try a few role-plays?
- Practice with an expert coach under realistic working conditions until you achieved fluency?

The answer is obvious. Any of the first five choices could provide some useful information about the skill but only the last choice will turn potential talent into demonstrable competence. Why? Because when you do something repeatedly - trying to perform up to an explicit standard - your mind and body get the "feel" of doing it proficiently.

And the "feel" of doing it is the skill. You can confirm that statement with your whole life's experience. If you don't acquire the feel, you haven't acquired the skill. Further, the feel is acquired only by using the skills to produce a real result: a good golf stroke, a sale, a successful negotiation.

Coaching the actual performance shortens the time it takes for an individual to become proficient enough to achieve the desired result repeatedly. Eventually, the new behavior becomes a preferred and self-chosen way of behaving.

So the best way to develop skillfulness is to practice doing the thing you're trying to do, under the expert guidance of someone who knows how. Yet when it comes to interpersonal-skills training in the corporate world—the teaching of so-called "soft skills" such as listening, leadership and teamwork - what's the one choice on the list that is almost never used? You guessed it.

Now guess the real reason behind the endless hand wringing in the corporate training field about how hard it is to get "learned" skills to transfer from the classroom to the job. Guess why trainers find it so terribly difficult to document any measurable business results arising from the soft-skills courses they conduct. Guess why "proving that training makes a difference" has acquired such prominent status as a Big Burning Issue in the training arena.

Here's why: When it comes to soft skills, companies and the "trainers" they employ almost never do any training at all. What they do instead is education. "Soft-skills training" is mostly a myth. The reason it doesn't work is because it doesn't happen.

Training vs. Education

There is a great deal of difference between training and education, though the vast majority of corporate trainers are not aware of it. Educating is not the same as training.

For most people, there is no causal relationship between education and performance. There is, indeed, a causal relationship between training and performance.

The reason: Knowledge isn't power. Competence is power. Power is the ability to create a desired effect. And creating desired effects is what we mean by "performance."

To educate is to increase intellectual awareness of a subject. To train is to make someone proficient at the execution of a given task. Many wonderful things can be said about education, but education doesn't cause competence. Only training does.

Try making a youngster competent at riding a bicycle by sitting her down at the kitchen table and explaining how to ride a bicycle. It won't work. It can't work. Because knowing about a skill is not the same as being skillful.

more...

Try taking a one-hour golf lesson from someone who uses typical corporate "training" methods. He'll meet you in a conference room far from the golf course, talk to you about a golf swing for 45 minutes, show you a video for 10 minutes, let you take make-believe swings at an imaginary golf ball for one minute ("Let's role-play!"), then ask you to write an "action plan" describing how you will apply what you've "learned." Absurd? Of course.

Skeptics will protest that some people who receive what I'm calling education in soft-skills areas actually do turn out higher performance as a result: they do, in fact, get better at selling or influencing or working in a team. And this is true—for maybe 10 percent to 15 percent of the trainees. Why? Because those people were already skillful before they attended your latest educational offering. If you take anyone who is already competent and add more education, you often will get better performance to some degree.

But what about the other 85 percent or 90 percent? It's no good pretending that the training department's job is simply to deliver some information about skills ("The Five Key Practices of Famous Leaders," "The 10 Fabulous Values of Team Players"), and then it's the field manager's job to actually to make employees proficient. If you accept the title of "trainer," your task is to make people competent, not just more aware. Blaming managers because the "skills" you supposedly imparted in your educational event failed to transfer to the job site is a cop-out and a lie.

Real Training For Real People

How does real training work? Begin by abandoning notions of what people ought to know or what sort of attitudes they ought to have or even how people acquire knowledge. Instead, ask, "How does one acquire skillfulness?"

The answer is simple and universal. The most efficient and effective way to acquire skillfulness is the same for everyone: 1) Students are quickly educated about the results they are being asked to achieve and the skills they will have to execute in order to obtain those results. 2) They practice, with a coach who can cut down trial-and-error time, until they achieve fluency.

That's all. All of it. Every time. In the hands of a good trainer or coach, Step 1 takes up 5 percent to 10 percent of the allotted time. Step 2 takes up the other 90 percent to 95 percent. Step 1 is purely education. Step 2 is training.

Bluntly, if the student isn't doing it, it isn't training. A day spent talking about skills will not make anyone skillful. Nobody gets the "feel" for real execution, done to a specific standard of competence. Toss in a role-play or two and they still don't get skillful. You find out only two things from role-plays, games and most simulations: whether people grasped the main idea well enough to attempt the task, and whether they are any good at playing make-believe.

Again, if they don't acquire the "feel," they don't acquire the skill. Only training accomplishes that. Training is a lot tougher and can be much more time-consuming than education. Maybe that's why so few "trainers" ever do any of it.

Even readers who agree with these points may say: "Fine, but all of that would have to be done in the field. It can't be done in a classroom. And even if it weren't too expensive and difficult to put that many expert coaches in the field, we don't want our trainees practicing on real customers. So how we do make them proficient before we send them into the real job environment?"

There is a way.

How To Do It.

Forget the idea of "classroom." A classroom is a place where education happens. It's a place where people learn about work instead of doing work.

To do real training in soft skills, start by taking a tip from advocates of "action learning": Invite people to a meeting room for a genuine working session—into which some coaching will be added.

The purpose of this working session is to evaluate and make decisions about ideas for improving the business: real ideas for real improvement that will make a real difference to the company. Ask participants to bring their own ideas to the meeting. Stipulate that these ideas must meet two criteria. First, the people in the meeting must be capable of implementing them; that is, someone in the room must have the authority to give a real yes or no to the idea. Second, if adopted, the improvement must be both measurable and capable of producing financial consequences for the business within 90 days.

In other words, you don't want ideas such as, "Let's change the cafeteria's vending machines." That might be an improvement, all right, but it's unlikely to produce a measurable ROI within three months.

more...

Ideas that would fit the criteria should sound more like these:

- "Suppose that instead of having a single sales rep call on the ABC Co., we put together a sales team of reps and technical specialists. I believe that this team could get ABC's business within 90 days."
- "I think we could achieve 50 percent faster turnaround on customer orders if we combined credit checking and warehouse dispatch under a single management function. We'd be more competitive, and I believe we'd start getting more orders within 90 days."
- "I think we could reduce breakage and waste on the Illinois plant production line if we changed suppliers. Let's use a local company instead of shipping from Detroit "

Explain to the participants that they are gathered in the room to make decisions about issues like these and to execute the ideas they like or at least to set the execution wheels in motion. They are not just there is "learn stuff."

Now, give them a quick educational overview of the skills that would most likely help them gain the commitment and support they'll need to implement their ideas (see "It's All About Buy-in"). You must also clearly define what "skillful" means - not just what the skills are. For instance, you are skillful at "showing respect" if you can acknowledge another person's point of view so well that the person begins to feel better - you can see more positive emotions emanating from the person—within 20 seconds. You are skillful at "leadership" if you can obtain a following of committed supporters who actually will show up and work on a task force to achieve the goals of Project X.

Make this introduction as succinct as possible. Then put everyone to work on the task of trying to gain commitment and support from one another. Coach them while they do so. (At the same time, you can teach them how to coach one another.) Make them do it over and over again, until at least 85 percent of them have become proficient at the skills and have achieved concrete desirable results.

An obvious "desirable result" is that a participant gains the needed support and approval for a good idea. A less obvious but no-less acceptable result is that the participant becomes persuaded that his idea is a stinker, but accepts this with no hard feelings; that is, the participant and his "adversary" agree that the idea is a nonstarter, and emerge with their relationship undamaged or even strengthened.

Measurements

Everything that happens after that brief educational introduction is training. Measurably defined skills are developed until fluency is observable in the here and now. Further, the outcomes of these interactions are tangible commitments for actual business initiatives that have measurable financial outcomes - the elusive "Level 4" result that trainers talk about so much but discover so seldom.

And you can stop worrying about "reinforcement." Why? Because we all naturally keep doing what works. We only need the goading or encouragement or reminding of managers when we can't produce the results we want.

Doing the real training is perfectly feasible, even with large groups of people. This approach - educate briefly, then train at length - is the method of martial arts trainers. It's the method of sports teams. It's the method of coaches in the performing arts. It works. The formula once again:

1. Clearly define the measure of skillfulness required. What does the performance look like when it's done right?
2. Clearly define the measurable outcome desired. What is the intended result of the performance?
3. "Educate" quickly and precisely.
4. Then train, via coached repetition, until the measurable performance level and the desired result are consistently achieved.

This formula almost always achieves measurable success, regardless of the skills you're trying to develop: selling, leadership, teamwork customer service, problem-solving and so on. Instead of seeing slight improvements in the performance of those 15 percent of trainees who were already capable, you'll send 85 percent out the door with genuine skillfulness instead of mere awareness.

Because the group is producing real initiatives that will make or save money, your company can expect a very healthy return on investment within three months. And nobody will have to ask you again if your training actually makes a difference.