

4 Key Strategies for Increasing Transference

By Al Switzler, Co-Founder, VitalSmarts

Have you ever felt frustration or disappointment about the amount of change that resulted from your training initiative? At the end of the training, you knew the participants learned the material—they shined on the cognitive assessment, performed like professionals in the practice sessions, and received gold stars on the behavioral test. And yet, when you saw them at work in real situations; surveyed their usage of the skills; and looked at the metrics you were trying to move, there were few shiny, gold stars.

Somewhere between the classroom and the real world, there is a transference gap that's tricky to bridge. Trying to help people change their behavior is one of the toughest challenges in any organization. Specifically, my colleagues and I recently conducted a study of 2,300 people and found only 6 percent of organizations are successful in influencing behavior change. Ninety-four percent of respondents reported they struggled to reverse employees' bad behaviors for a year or longer, and a third reported the problems persisted for more than 10 years.

The 6 percent who succeeded at influencing behavior on the job expanded their training initiative to also include multiple strategies aimed at personal, social, and environmental influences. Conversely, those who failed to move the needle on behavior change relied on a single transference strategy, such as incentives or verbal persuasion. To increase skill transference and ensure your training efforts are successful, you must identify the influences fighting against change in your organization and create a multifaceted plan to turn those influences in your favor. The key to success is to combine multiple sources of influence into a potent solution.

Here are a few tips to turn your training initiative into a behavior-change initiative. Start by enlisting multiple sources of influence to increase skill transfer-

ence and lead positive change in your own organization.

1. **Focus on behavior.** Simply repeating vague values drives little change. “Safety first” is a slogan, not a set of skills. Those who identify concrete and clear behaviors they hope people will enact are far more effective influencers. For example, a large oil drilling company increased safety by first identifying the three high-leverage behaviors everyone needed to enact when a drilling rig was shut down or when a storm was coming.
2. **Connect to values.** In your training, help people connect to the value of new skills by using potent stories and direct experiences to make change a moral and human issue. For example, New York restaurateur Danny Meyer helps employees connect to the value of “hospitality” rather than just “customer service” by repeatedly sharing powerful stories of meaningful guest experiences their colleagues create.
3. **Leverage peer pressure.** Social influence is the most potent force for change. Research shows that if people believe bad behavior is normal, they are far more likely to follow suit. A Ghanaian gold mine reduced vehicle accidents by engaging respected drivers to train other drivers in proper safety practices. Peers were far more effective at gaining compliance than either staff professionals or senior leaders. This is true of any behavior you are training in the classroom. Find the opinion leaders and use them as examples to set the new norm.
4. **Change the environment.** Use tools, technology, information, and surroundings to make people conscious of the need to change and enabled to make better choices. For example, software entrepreneur Rich Sheridan cut employees’ time fixing errors from 40 percent of working time to no time at all by putting code writers in teams of two, sharing one computer. This environmental change significantly increased employee productivity and morale. Use the environment to make the good behaviors easy and the bad behaviors hard.

The most important takeaway from this research is to combine personal, social, and structural strategies together. Cherry-picking one or two won’t work. A

passionate speech from a favorite executive at the end of training may help for a little while. But ultimately, if influences such as negative peer pressure, incentives that reward the old behaviors, and too much bureaucracy are pulling your employees in the opposite direction, the power of the speech will be short-lived. So think about how to harness the sources of influence in your favor before you send your classroom stars out into the real world—then watch your organization change for good.

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