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Project Manager

T O D A Y

Training and Change The Holistic Approach

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Before you read any further, try this experiment. Fold your arms. Unfold them. Fold them the other way round (so the arm that is usually on top is on the bottom)

Did you allow yourself to try the experiment? Did you not want to do it? Did you feel awkward doing it? This exercise highlights how the learning process can involve resistance, discomfort and error. Imagine how your feelings of discomfort and resistance, and your errors might increase if the experiment was related to your job security or the success of your organisation's projects. The training provider's job is more than just imparting theory or new instructions to trainees. They must also respect and address the resistance and discomfort of the trainee, and work with them to overcome their errors.

"Hold on a second" you might think. How did we move from crossing arms to project success, and what has that got to do with an holistic approach to training? This article provides some answers.

So what do we mean by an holistic approach to training? The short answer is that besides dealing with the process of enhancing the knowledge and skills of your staff, it also deals with their attitudes. If you think that attitudes are not important when it comes to training, then we must part company here. If you are interested in finding out more, or are already convinced that attitudes can make or break the success of a training project, then you are in favour of an holistic approach to training.

Training is an important step in the change process. When you

approach a training provider you are looking for some help to change. You usually want your staff to do something they don't currently do. In the case of project management training, you want project managers to manage their projects, or carry out an aspect of project management, more effectively.

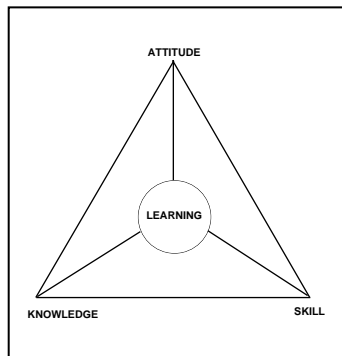


Figure 1 - Changes in Attitude, Knowledge and Skill constitute Learning.

THE TRAINING PROJECT

Most successful training programmes are managed as change projects. An effective project management training provider will walk-the-talk by modelling good project management practice. Walking-the-talk should include; working with the client to produce an agreed project brief/proposal, producing an agreed project plan, managing the training project and the training team, carrying out project reporting, managing change where necessary, and managing a post-implementation review.

These practices should be informed by a sound understanding of how adults learn and should take into account the attitudes of the organisation, management and trainees towards learning.

Many organisations do not treat training in this way and they are often unhappy with the return on their investment. These organisations are not investing wisely.

THE HOLISTIC APPROACH - ATTITUDE, KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL

If I were faced with a major medical operation and I had to choose between:

- Someone who had read about how to do the operation and seen it demonstrated.
- Someone who had read about it, seen it demonstrated and successfully carried out the operation before.
- Someone who had read about it, seen it demonstrated, carried out the operation before and was totally committed to following the right procedures and using the right techniques.

I would choose the person with the knowledge, the skills and the right attitude.

Failing to project manage a project effectively is not usually life-threatening, however the same principles apply.



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For many organisations embarking on a training project, the current state and the desired state of the trainees level of knowledge and skill are used to drive course design and training provider selection. With an holistic approach, it is imperative that the issue of trainee attitude is also taken into account. The relationship between Attitude, Knowledge and Skill is shown in figure 1.

This fact has been supported in a variety of research programmes. It is summarised by Malcolm Knowles, who offers the view that to learn, adults must be given the opportunity to agree or buy-in to any learning process. When trainees buy-in to the learning process, their attitude to learning becomes more positive, they actively participate in the process, and they take responsibility for their learning.

WHAT CAN THE ORGANISATION AND MANAGERS DO TO HELP?

Understanding how adults learn is key to the success of a training project. One of the models we use is shown in Figure 2.

In a healthy learning environment, a trainee will be carrying out his or her job in an Unconsciously Incompetent way (they don't know what they don't know). They begin to recognise what they do not know and what they cannot do by becoming aware of their limitations and the errors they make. This, coupled with attending an appropriate training course, enables them to move from Unconscious Incompetence to Conscious Incompetence (they know what they don't know). They take the opportunity and time (probably on the training course) to rehearse what they have learned, to move from Conscious Incompetence to Conscious Competence (they know what they know). Finally they take the opportunity and time, whilst receiving support from management, to utilise what they have learned in the workplace. This enables them to move from Conscious Competence to Unconscious Competence.

Here, they have integrated their learning and eventually they become not so conscious of what it is they have learnt (they don't know what they know).

In our experience, organisations invest money around the Rehearse stage of the learning cycle - sending staff on training courses. In other words the organisation uses the money to support the trainee moving from the organisation's perception of the trainee's Conscious Incompetence to Conscious Competence (See Figure 2).

Many organisations do not invest enough money or time at the Recognise stage. They don't accurately establish (for the organisation and the trainee/client) an awareness of the project management process and what it is that needs to be learned in order to follow this process.

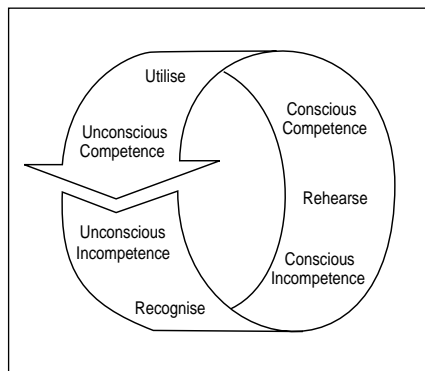


Figure 2 - The Learning Circle (Robinson, W.L. 1974 and Munir, E.M. 1994)

Many organisations do not invest enough money or time at the Utilise stage. They do not allow time for, or provide support and feedback to, the trainee attempting to utilise new skills in workplace. In effect they do not support the trained staff member in their move from Conscious Competence to Unconscious Competence.

In many organisations it is not 'the done thing' to admit weakness or incompetence, so staff keep it a secret and the company's projects suffer. In other organisations it is the norm for staff to be sent on courses without formally establishing training needs. Then the trained staff are expected to be 'instant experts' when they return! Staff may feel demotivated and angry if they have been sent on a course that does not address their incompetence. They may feel cynical and angry when they return to the workplace and receive little commitment and support from management to aid them in implementing their new skills. Consequently their new skills can fall into disuse and again the company projects suffer.

PLANNING YOUR PROJECT

To be able to plan and manage a training project effectively, it is necessary to accept that the Learning Cycle is a true representation of how adults learn, and that the attitudes of the organisation, management and trainees must be accounted for in the learning process. In planning the project you can take each stage of the learning cycle in turn, and identify the activities that should be going on to facilitate the move from one step in the cycle to the next. You can also identify activities that address potential attitude issues for the organisation, management and trainees.

Now, before I finish...
Fold your arms. Unfold them.
Fold them the other way round
(so the arm that is usually on top is on the bottom)

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Ervin Munir is with Advanced Management Solutions. They stress the holistic approach. The tasks they work on, in partnership with clients, are:

Produce and agree a project brief/proposal

Plan the project

Manage the project

Analyse the business project management process

Facilitate staff to realise their competence and incompetence in relation to the business project management process

Gain buy-in to the learning process and the resultant change

Carry out course design and focus on knowledge, skills and attitude learning objectives and ensuring that delegates can do something they couldn't do before the training

Deliver courses in a client-centred way respecting the learning attitudes of the delegates

Sell the idea of not treating delegates as instant experts when they return to the workplace

Offer support and space to delegates to make mistakes and become more comfortable with their new way of doing things

Measure success by checking that delegates are doing the things they didn't do before they were trained