

# Training People for a Better Future

William Tate

**T**raining is important. But it's a bit like motherhood - hard to argue against. It's easily taken for granted, applied like a soothing balm or sticking plaster without clear diagnosis. It is also a convenient football: organisations wouldn't suffer skills shortages if they trained more, politicians claim. Inside organisations, top managers hold training responsible for poor individual and collective performance, yet equally herald it as the solution. Witness how often chief executives invoked training in these respects in various financial services scandals such as the mis-selling of pensions.

These familiar scenarios are uninformed, unrealistic and unfair to training and trainers. There are other more powerful forces at work in organisations that explain misguided behaviour and poor performance. There are other ills and dark shadows in company cultures and systems that need challenging first. And there are a lot of remedies, of which training is but one. Training has its place, but needs approaching with a due sense of proportion. Above all, training needs to be understood strategically.

So in place of instinct, myopia and politics, how can organisations gain a proper perspective on training? How can managers choose when to use it appropriately? How can they increase the likelihood of training making an efficient contribution to the business's goals?



**If training is to succeed, it needs linking with the business**

Individuals often seek training to improve their individual skills and marketability. That's fine. But making training available for all those who want it - for themselves or their staff - is not a training strategy. As far as the employer is concerned, training is a means to an end. It is driven by the needs of the organisation. If it is too costly for the benefits achieved, the training budget may be cut.

Such cuts are criticised as short-sighted: training is, after all, 'an investment in the future'; but training has to earn its keep, and can do. Yet frequently, it doesn't; it survives as a protected species, having acquired status as a 'good thing'. What's needed is a more clinical examination of training's contribu-

tion, with the aim of increasing value for money.

If training is to succeed, it needs linking with the business, directly or indirectly. Trainers are thus part of the management team, though they may not see it this way. The organisation may not include them in the business agenda. Training's purpose is to improve the organisation's internal effectiveness, and thereby the business's external success in the eyes of its various stakeholders.

Yet organisations typically hold training at arm's length, giving little thought to what training the organisation needs, and how it can best be supported and implemented. Many organisations seem content if only a small percentage of

what is learned is applied. And they think of change as part of a different agenda. If learners are enthusiastic to change things post-training, they're an embarrassing problem, not a saviour.

Such analysis may produce a wry smile. It sounds depressingly familiar. More worrying, paradoxically, is that it may not be a source of worry to those who sponsor training. The problem is, to get the most out of training, you have to think hard about what you want training for, what needs to change for the organisation to benefit, and what the options are.

Should other levers be pulled instead of, or as well as, training? Dumbed-down menus of courses (still popular in organisations) don't achieve any of this. They help individuals to choose, but they remove choice for the organisation, which no longer needs to think about its own needs.

Training has become an umbrella term for any thinking or learning process, even including communication briefings and job changes. This leads to confusion between education and training. People now talk about being trained at university. To the purist, however, training narrows performance options so that people's range of behaviour *converges* around an expert view - corporate, professional or trade - of what performance is ideal. By contrast, education expands and *diverges* people's options; it is thereby better able to support organisational evolution and change.

Education, as defined here, encourages diversity and plurality. If an organisation is to survive in a complex environment (business, technological, political and social), it needs its internal resources to be equally diverse. This is known as *Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety*. Organisations can learn from this

basic law of nature: without such a multi-response capability an organism cannot compete and will die.

This principle is becoming increasingly important. Growing complexity means that opportunities and threats are becoming more diverse and rapid. Competitive challenges are becoming more difficult to predict. Old skills and responses may be insufficient to meet them.

There is a risk of learning being too engaged with how the business is now, thereby maintaining the status quo and the current regime's interests. It may rely excessively on what is currently known about the likely future. If the learning activity is to realise its full contribution to the business, it needs to help learners to see ways of doing things differently (which even their bosses may not yet be in a position to recognise and value); and to develop their potential as fully as possible in preparation for the unknown and unknowable (their own and the organisation's).

So a learning strategy that seeks to address tomorrow's unknown threats and opportunities calls for diversity of skills, opinions, values and beliefs, at least in the managerial cadre. This is an uncomfortable truth for leaders. If, on the other hand, the urgent need is to ship today's goods out of the door this week to today's customers, then training is more likely to make a contribution because it closes down discussion and options, and focuses attention on the best way.

We *train* pilots to fly (today's) planes; we don't educate them. We educate children in the use of drugs; we don't train them. The label doesn't matter as much as the need to be clear at any given point about what we need, whether it is learning that is convergent or divergent on the organisation's plans.

In neglecting to think about the

organisation's needs and contribution, training risks concentrating its expertise on the efficacy of trainers' learning inputs. But if potential is to be realised in beneficial outcomes for the organisation, it requires two further ingredients: *will* and opportunity.

Training should facilitate change, not attempt to provide it. Linked with system changes and other HR levers, training can make a powerful contribution. Used alone, training is a weak lever. Training is frequently undertaken without sufficient regard to the systemic properties of organisations. As such, it confuses individual changes with modification in organisational variables, such as the business's mission, structure and reward system.

Managers need to recognise the place of training and value it, while not giving it ideas above its station. W Edwards Deming, the American thinker and teacher behind the Japanese quality revolution, argued that most improvement in organisations comes from improving the system (the way the work works) not the people (the way the people work).

How does work come in, how is it parcelled out, how much discretion do people have, who checks whose work, who is responsible for coordination across functional teams, where does accountability lie, etc? It's worth bearing these system design and flow questions in mind when pointing the finger at training - whether for solutions or blame. ■

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