The Great Divide

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The difference between training and learning is not about who offers it, but who owns it.

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— Greg Miller, vice president and chief learning officer for Aflac
Keith Meyerson, director of learning for retail department store Neiman Marcus Group Services, recounts a story of an executive who asked him to create a training program on friendliness because she thought the company’s customer service scores could be improved in that area.

“Think about that for a second,” he said. “A class for adults on how to play nice with each other. Is that what I’m here for? Unfortunately, that’s how some executives still look at the role of a training department. Too often they want to throw people into a training program because they want to treat the symptom and not the problem; learning identifies the root cause. Training organizations should be learning organizations.”

Meyerson’s story and plea aren’t unique. Greg Miller, vice president and chief learning officer for Aflac, a supplemental insurance provider, received a request earlier this year for a team-building course. “Let’s not assume we’re going to do a class first. ‘What do you want these people to learn?’ I always ask. ‘I want these people to get along better,’ is what this particular executive said. ‘What aren’t they doing right now that you want them to learn that will improve their ability to get along better?’ I asked. ‘They interrupt each other in meetings,’ he said. OK, how do we talk about proper communication during a meeting? It’s not always about taking a ropes course.”

Miller said a large percentage of training requests are not training requests at all, they’re a call for learning. Executives often ask for training courses because they’re able to drop off their teams in classrooms and wash away their concerns, which doesn’t always produce learning. For courses to be considered significant learning exercises, employees may undergo a training class, but the leader needs to develop his or her own strategy to support the training that took place and reinforce its takeaways with relatable projects.

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What’s in a Name?

According to Stefaan van Hooydonk, dean of Philips Lighting University, the global electronics company’s corporate university, learning is the umbrella definition encompassing training on one hand and performance support on the other. Van Hooydonk said training is a function of getting up to speed and is typically an activity someone new would do — a new hire or a newly appointed manager. As such, training is an off-the-job activity that employees have to leave the normal flow of their daily work to participate in. Training in this form is typically of the formal, instructor-led variety, but it also can refer to digital learning activities such as self-study e-learning packages, single-player education games, webinars and e-books.

“Training is a push activity whereby somebody other than the trainee is deciding on the content to be learned,” van Hooydonk said. “Corporations believe this is the focus of the training organization, yet it’s a common notion in the industry that training is only responsible for 10 percent of total learning for people.”

On the other hand, performance support enables employees to keep current and innovative, and is the area where seasoned employees often learn at point of need. This is not a formal activity like training; it’s an informal on-the-job activity where learning and work combine. As such, performance support refers to people learning by searching for information on an intranet or the Internet, joining internal and external professional networks online or participating in peer coaching. According to van Hooydonk, this is the other form of learning that is more important and is the area where seasoned employees often learn.

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We asked our CLO-Network, LinkedIn and Twitter followers: What is the difference between training and learning?

Via CLO-Network discussion:

Robynne Sherrill: “Training is designed to provide new knowledge, skills or awareness. Learning occurs as a result of training demonstrated through on-the-job application and transfer of knowledge and skills to situations and people. Training is the 10 percent and learning is demonstrated through a combination of the 20 percent and 70 percent. When someone is ‘trained,’ that doesn’t necessarily mean they’ve ‘learned.’ Learning is an action that must be demonstrated.”

Anwar Alramadan: “Training, I believe, is when the company sends employees to take courses or on-the-job type of training, while learning is when the employee voluntarily takes the initiative to develop himself and share knowledge with others.”

Via LinkedIn:

Christopher Calta: “An organization can call it either ‘training’ or ‘learning,’ but what is more important is how it is valued and supported. If you wanted to separate them, you can probably say that ‘training’ is about the organization and ‘learning’ is about the person. Training usually involves a transfer of skills or knowledge that is intended for the gain of an organization. The focus on results does matter and ‘learning’ may not be as quantifiable as ‘training’ unless it is tied to the business.”

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— Keith Meyerson, director of learning for Neiman Marcus Group Services

90 percent of how people learn, yet few training functions concentrate on it.

“Performance support is very closely linked to knowledge management and knowledge sharing,” he said. “Performance support is a pull activity where the learner pulls information and knowledge from different sources to assist him or her with a specific learning or knowledge need.”

When it comes to measuring impact, training is typically measured by counting seats, hours and number of people attending live or viewing online materials. Performance support is measured by measuring pull and ease of accessibility to learning tools. Van Hooydonk said in performance support, the learning function’s role is to facilitate an easy flow of knowledge through the organization and to customers through knowledge portals and sharing tools that bring together specialists and support organizational processes.

At Philips, performance support is measured by evaluating how engaged internal online communities are. For instance, the company counts the number of downloads from its learning portals.

“When we started launching the Lighting University website to the Philips Lighting employee population — 54,000 employees — in January 2011, we had 971 hits to our website that month. In June 2011, this number grew to 15,000, in September 2011 to 30,000 and in March 2012, this number was at more than 60,000. Further, the average length of a visit grew from five minutes in January 2011 to 19.2 minutes in December 2011,” he said.

Knowledge certification is another measuring dimension at Philips Lighting. Through online tests, van Hooydonk’s team measures employees’ knowledge of products and technology. “Supported by good management support and by an engaging campaign, colleagues all around the globe are attempting to pass these courses for certification. Since the passing rate is 30 percent the first time people attempt these tests, people tend to look at the suggested materials — e-books, educational games, articles and e-learning packages — before they try to go for a next try on the test. This action forces people to get to know our learning portals in depth, which leads to repeat visitors because people know what they want to find and where it is after some practice.”

Training’s Here to Stay

Connie Mardis, director of global marketing education for Siemens Healthcare Diagnostics, said training refers to being able to do things quickly, efficiently and better with practice. Learning is the development that happens in a person, by choice, as an employee gets new skills and gains new insights. Learning leaders can force training, but learning requires motivation.

“Adults learn for only one reason: to solve a problem,” she said. “If you don’t think that’s true, look at your 200-page cellphone manual. When’s the last time you optionally picked that up? When’s the last time you picked it up even when you had a problem? You go to YouTube. The way we learn is changing, and we’re moving away from training, but there will always be a space for it.”

Mardis said there will always be a need for new training tools and techniques aimed at increasing speed and efficiency, improving workflow and practicing tasks to ensure precision. But there’s nothing like developing and delivering courses that introduce new paradigms, explore inquiry models and create opportunities for cross-functional and cross-cultural teams to collaborate and innovate. She said at Siemens, executives believe providing education or growth and development ignites passion, leads to innovation and helps retain talent.

“We need to stop throwing people into training because it’s the easiest thing to do,” Neiman Marcus Group Services’ Meyerson said. “Too often we don’t know what to do, so we throw a training course at it. We have to start building the right culture, an environment where we’re hiring the right people with the right attitudes that mirror our values, are self-motivated and want to take on learning experiences by themselves. It’s the only way L&D will stick and be sustainable.”

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IN PRACTICE  A HYBRID APPROACH TO TRAINING AND LEARNING AT HALLIBURTON

In the learning versus training debate, the definition of terms often boils down as follows: Learning emphasizes interaction and personal experience, which helps participants achieve long-term behavioral changes. Training is viewed as a more passive activity, where participants listen to lectures to achieve knowledge transfer from instructor to pupil.

Regardless of the merits of either practice, it can be difficult to operate an employee development program in pure learning or training mode. For example, at oilfield products and services company Halliburton, employee development professionals have to build employee skills and knowledge levels in a large, field-based organization that requires operational mastery of complex, technical information under a tight timeframe. This puts severe constraints on Halliburton instructors’ ability to interact with participants or to provide opportunities to apply technical concepts to real-world situations on an individual basis.

Instructors have found that a hybrid approach works best to achieve behavioral changes and knowledge transfer. A hybrid approach combines elements from both learning and training strategies to deliver interactive features in a classroom session. The number of participants and the need to keep lessons on schedule without getting sidetracked with free-ranging discussions is one barrier to interaction in a traditional lecture-style environment. New technology tools can help.

For example, Halliburton uses interactive software to enable instructors to poll audiences during PowerPoint presentations in real time. Participants respond using a keypad or mobile device, and the results are displayed on the slide without requiring the instructor to leave the presentation screen.

Introducing this level of interactivity serves several purposes. By engaging the audience, instructors provide a way for students to actively participate in the session. Student answers also can provide important real-time indicators of how well the presented information is being retained. An interactive approach is especially effective with younger participants, who are accustomed to interactive media and may find a pure lecture scenario challenging.

Further, Halliburton instructors find that embedding questions in their presentations is a great attention-getter. It works as an icebreaker to open new sessions, and as training proceeds, the opportunity to respond to questions helps keep participants focused and interested.

The Halliburton training team also has observed that a system to elicit audience responses without calling on individuals or requesting a show of hands can encourage participation from audience members who might otherwise be too intimidated to speak before a crowd. Another advantage is that audience members answer questions about knowledge retention honestly since they know their answers will be displayed in aggregate. This helps instructors get an accurate reading on the session’s effectiveness in real time so they can make adjustments, such as spending extra time going over a particularly challenging concept.

In an environment where employee skills can mean the difference between business success or failure, audience engagement during development sessions is vitally important. A training-learning hybrid approach has been effective at Halliburton because it enables participants to interact with instructors in real time, turning a training event into a two-way discussion without disrupting the flow of the session. It helps instructors keep participants focused and involved, and it allows employee development personnel to receive real-time feedback on training efficacy, combining the best of both worlds.

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