The Manager’s Responsibility for Employee Learning

BY JEFFREY BERK

To have a lasting effect on employees, learning programs must receive buy-in and support from an organization’s managers. It’s up to the learning function to make sure management professionals understand their critical role in employee development.

Some time ago, I listened intently to General Frank Anderson of Defense Acquisition University (DAU) explain how a lot of new knowledge and skill is obtained from DAU but may not be optimally applied on the job because managers don’t assume the responsibility they should when their direct reports are sent off to training. He coined the term “scrap learning” to describe the phenomena.

I thought about Anderson’s remarks again when I heard Dr. Robert Brinkerhoff — known for his Success Case Method of learning evaluation — give a presentation earlier this year. Brinkerhoff gave an Oscar-worthy performance when he illustrated the three types of learners to the audience:

**Learner 1:** Attends training because he or she is told to do so. Preparation involves knowing where to go and at what time.

**Learner 2:** Attends learning because he or she loves the experience. He or she will take any new training that’s available.

**Learner 3:** Attends training when needed. He or she is prepped by the manager about expectations when returning to the job and therefore comes with a realistic and specific focus for what needs to be learned and how it should be applied.

When Brinkerhoff asked the audience of 100-plus how many had Learner 3 in their training programs, less than 20 percent raised their hands. It is a sad state when high-quality and highly effective training programs have a lot of Learners 1 and 2.

Brinkerhoff’s remarks prompted me to study some benchmark data. I mined the KnowledgeAdvisors database of learning evaluations and benchmarks to gain a better understanding of Anderson’s scrap learning and Brinkerhoff’s Learner 3.

Here is what I found:

- Sixty percent of learned knowledge and skill stops being applied on the job 90 days after learning ends (or sooner). This means there is 60 percent “scrap.” It also means there are many of Learners 1 and 2 participating in training.
- Fifty-two percent of respondents not applying training on the job said they didn’t use it because they had “no opportunity” to do so. Sixteen percent cited other priorities as their reason for not using training on the job.
- There was a 1.04 point difference between learners who said the materials provided by learning were adequate as opposed to their feedback on how managers helped them determine use of the training back on the job. This means there is a significant drop-off in what the learning function provides as support versus what employees’ environments provide as support.

**Best Practices for Manager Responsibility**

As a result of this data, I reached a simple conclusion (admittedly, one many people have known for years): For any learning program to be successful, no matter...
how good or bad the program, there must be manager responsibility and involvement to maximize the impact on the job. Below are my top 10 practices for manager responsibility. Unlike the David Letterman list, it is not in any particular order, nor is it especially humorous. But I hope you will find it useful in engaging managers' sense of responsibility for learning.

1. Conduct a pre-assessment for strategic, visible or costly programs. Also, when participants register, send the assessment to the manager to get the following information:
   a. Awareness that the employee enrolled.
   b. Expectations to be set with employee prior to learning.
   c. Resources provided to employee to apply learning.
   d. Specific projects to apply post-training.

2. Build into any on-boarding program the responsibilities of managers when approving employees to attend learning initiatives. Focus on awareness, expectation setting, resource provisions and alignment of projects with proximity of training.

3. For any strategic, visible or costly program, managers should approve the learners going to the program.

4. Prior to attending training, managers should be encouraged to have a brief meeting with the employee, review the course objectives and align those to specific job tasks and business results. During this exercise, managers should set appropriate expectations of the employee. For example, the employee is expected to give a presentation to the rest of the department on the key learning themes from the training and how this will be applied to the job.

5. Managers should be encouraged to provide ample resources to not only attend the training but to apply it optimally on the job. The manager should review monetary, time, physical and people resources to assist the employee in applying the learning.

6. Managers should be encouraged to provide specific projects in which the employee can apply the training within a reasonable time frame. For example, if an employee learns a new sales strategy, he or she should build it into the next negotiation they conduct on the job and — assuming it is executed correctly — be encouraged to do so in subsequent negotiations.

7. Managers should create an environment that is conducive to learning. This is done by encouraging employees to seek out learning opportunities and
creating an environment that spreads knowledge sharing and learning. Creating rewards and incentives to learn, and to share and apply what is learned on the job, should be encouraged.

8. The learning department should present managers with data on scrap learning within their organizations. Using questions from surveys, learning managers can aid line managers in understanding where scrap learning is taking place and why. Also, data can be an objective way of rooting out the causes of scrap learning.

9. The learning function should evaluate managers and participants 60 days after training and look for evidence of management support and use of training on the job. At a minimum, it is a reminder to the manager and employee that they should be applying the learning.

5. Were you provided adequate resources to optimally apply the learning?
6. Did you determine specific uses for the training after it took place?

For example, if you just ask on a follow-up survey, “What percent of the new knowledge or skill learned was applied to the job?” that can benchmark against the 60 percent scrap learning indicator cited above. So if you have a response that averages around 40 percent applied, that’s consistent with the 60 percent not applied, or scrap.

The goal is to elevate a metric such as this to the learning dashboard and place a goal against it to root out the scrap. Find out where it is more prevalent. It is likely a lot worse in certain areas than others. If you can reduce it by 10 percent, that may mean thousands of dollars in saved costs. More importantly, it could mean thousands of dollars more in increased impact and business outcomes because more people are applying what they’ve learned on the job to make a difference.

Here’s a short case study to illustrate this point: An insurance company asked a question about managers setting expectations before the training and then determining specific use afterward. They ran the data against lines of business (finance, HR, claims, underwriting). Finance was the lowest of all the groups.

The learning function showed the findings to leaders throughout the organization. It eventually was determined that the finance group had a negative experience working with learning on a Sarbanes-Oxley learning program a few years back and decided to create its own training. As a result, finance managers discouraged or did not legitimize or support the learning-sponsored training, preferring their own. The net effect was to stop the duplication of effort and collaborate. The data helped not only to pinpoint the scrap, but also cultivated a nonemotional and objective idea exchange to overcome it.

Managers have responsibility when employees go to training. It is learning’s responsibility to highlight this. Using metrics to do this is an objective and nonemotional way to do it. Following the metrics with some practices to obtain and maintain manager involvement changes the culture. In a culture that supports it, learning will thrive in the form of impact and outcomes. That’s good for L&D, the manager, the employee and the stakeholders of the business.

For any learning program to be successful, no matter how good or bad the program, there must be manager responsibility and involvement to maximize the impact on the job.

10. Learning representatives should meet with managers prior to a major program and discuss how the learning event can impact a business result. The business result should be tracked and linked to the development initiative. Linking learning to business results can show managers the criticality of training.

Measuring and Decreasing Scrap

The old adage, “You only manage what you measure,” contains a great deal of truth. That is why you must measure the scrap learning/management responsibility issue. It’s actually easy to do.

A first step is to ask the right questions on evaluations to determine quantification of scrap and where sources of scrap can be found. Questions include the following:

1. What percent of learning actually was applied to the job?
2. When did the learner apply the learning (e.g., time-to-job impact)?
3. What are the major barriers to applying the learning on the job?
4. Did you set expectations with your manager before the learning event?
5. Were you provided adequate resources to optimally apply the learning?
6. Did you determine specific uses for the training after it took place?

Jeffrey Berk is chief operating officer for KnowledgeAdvisors and an adjunct professor of management in Loyola University’s MBA program. He also is the author of the book Champions of Change: The Manager’s Guide to Creating Sustainable Process Improvement and co-author of Human Capital Analytics: Measuring and Improving Learning and Talent Impact. He can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.