



Use these strategies to help learners retain what they've learned.



SEVEN TRICKS TO MAKE LEARNING

stick

BY SEBASTIAN BAILEY

Talent development professionals spend vast amounts of time, money, and energy ensuring employees show up to training events and learn something while they're there. Yet, despite your best efforts, only 20 percent of trainees will actually change the way they work as a result. The vast majority—70 percent—will try out the new skills, but will quickly backslide into old habits.

It's no surprise that training is one of the first things to be cut when budgets are squeezed. To increase the value of training, we must discover exactly what makes people change and stay that way. It's not just about work. From quitting smoking to losing weight or donating to charity, scientists are keen to unlock the secret of sustained change. But much of their research gathers dust in scientific journals, too complex and theoretical to apply in real life.

There are seven insights from scientific literature that, when combined with lessons learned in practice, increase the likelihood that learning will stick. If we apply these to talent development, we'll see significant performance improvements and greatly increase the value talent development delivers.

Build belief

When people believe in the value of change, they are motivated to make it happen. Sounds simple, but often in learning we rush people from the “old way” to the “new way” without selling the benefits, and are then surprised that they quickly revert to the status quo.

We need to spend as much time and energy on engagement as we do on the program itself. Only when people believe that the personal benefits of making the change outweigh the pain of doing so will they commit to altering their behavior.

This insight comes from psychologist James O. Prochaska, who developed the Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change in the 1970s. He identified the different stages people go through when changing a habit: persisting with the old habit (no intention to change); contemplating making a change; preparing to do so by putting plans in place; taking action by changing their behavior; and finally maintenance, when the new behavior becomes a habit.

But what differentiates those who successfully maintain a healthier habit (such as quitting smoking) from those who relapse?

In successful changes, there is a crucial period during the contemplation stage where the pros of changing began to outweigh the cons. If people jump straight into action without going through this important mental shift, deep down they still believe that the drawbacks

of changing outweigh the positives, so the change won't stick.

Create emotional arousal

A global consultancy faced a problem: It recruited the brightest and best MBA graduates who, with all the intelligence and self-confidence that a prestigious education brings, began to radically reinvent important methodologies. In a world where consistency is key, this led to conflict and slower delivery. How could the consultancy get these graduates to see the benefit of the tried and tested ways of working? The answer lay in their onboarding.

Shortly after joining, the graduates were taken to a remote location and ran a simulation in which their tasks didn't play to their strengths. Tension, conflict, and havoc ensued. After this unexpected failure, the graduates were far more likely to accept the tools that would help them succeed when they ran the simulation again. They left committed to using the consultancy's methodology.

Talent development practitioners can harness the power of positive stress to make people pay attention to new ways of behaving—but only when the stress is accompanied by a clear solution.

In another study, people who read fearful messages about the importance of getting vaccinated reported a far greater intention to do so than those who heard traditional recommendations. However, in both cases, the number of participants who actually went on to get vaccinated was low: just 3.3 percent.

Stress alone can push people into a state of paralyzed fear. When fear-inducing messages also were accompanied by a map to the nearest medical center, the number of

INTRODUCING SITUATIONAL CUES ABOUT WHEN AND WHERE TO APPLY LEARNING DECREASES MENTAL EFFORT AND MAKES IT MORE LIKELY PEOPLE WILL FOLLOW THROUGH.

participants who got vaccinated jumped to 33 percent. Creating anxiety by demonstrating the personal consequences of not changing drives action, so long as we provide a specific and explicit solution.

Use stories over facts

Training presentations often are crammed full of data and statistics in an effort to win over skeptics. This approach is misguided. Stories resonate emotionally with participants, are easier to recall, and ultimately lead to greater behavior change.

In a study, students were paid \$5 to listen to a pitch about Save the Children. Afterward they could donate some or all of their fee to the charity. Those who listened to a data-based pitch filled with compelling statistics gave on average \$1.43. Those who heard a specific story about the plight of a single child donated on average \$2.38. The empathy the story evoked was a far more powerful behavioral trigger than the data.

Another intriguing finding is that people rate rhyming statements as more accurate than statements that convey the same meaning but don't rhyme. Psychologists think that this is because rhymes require less mental effort to process and understand. The more we can do to reduce participants' cognitive load (that's to say, degree of mental effort), the more likely they will be to remember their learning and make it stick. So don't just tell, use stories that sell.

Share written intentions

Training sessions almost always end with goal-setting. Most of the time this involves participants writing down vague statements about what they plan to achieve, which get swiftly filed away and even more swiftly forgotten.

Psychologist Peter Gollwitzer discovered that when he asked students to think specifically about when, where, and how they were going to update their resumes, 80 percent of them subsequently did so, compared with 20 percent of those who wrote a general commitment. Implementation intentions—when participants consider exactly how they'll

implement the change rather than just what the outcome will be—are a far more powerful driver of transfer. Intentions are even more effective when they're phrased as "If ... then..." statements.

The Methodology That Makes Learning Stick

People only change when they believe it's in their own interest, so the initial engagement campaign for a training program piques interest and makes people contemplate making a change. An in-depth online diagnostic makes it personally relevant and creates positive stress that there's room for improvement. Anxiety is only useful when accompanied by a solution, so participants also receive a learning toolkit that shows them the steps to change and primes them with the mindset of a great learner.

Action-packed instructor-led learning bites capitalize on the science behind what makes learning stick. They do away with long-winded theory and get straight down to practice, focusing on real-world problems and helping participants spot opportunities to use practical tools. Each one ends with a written pledge: a specific "If ... then ..." intention, combined with the right type of social support.

Application tasks—known as missions—are built into the workflow, meaning it's easy to spot opportunities to use the new tools. Finally, participants regroup in booster sessions, in which they review their progress and share insights with their peers. This increases momentum and engagement for the next round. Throughout the cycle, we do everything we can to reduce cognitive load, making it simple for participants to apply their learning and sustain the change.

In a second study, Gollwitzer asked people to commit to completing computerized math puzzles. Those who write down that they'll solve the puzzles at a specific time and place deviate from their promise by around eight hours. Those who frame their intentions as "If ... then ..." statements ("If it is Wednesday at 11 a.m., then I will do the puzzles") deviate by just 1.5 hours.

Introducing situational cues about when and where to apply learning decreases mental effort and makes it more likely people will follow through.

Another way to increase accountability and drive transfer is for learners to share intentions with other people and ask peers to help them stay on track. However, sharing a goal can create a false sense of achievement, which reduces anxiety and makes change less likely. Programs that include a social support aspect must make clear that sharing a goal does not count as progress.

Build transfer into workflow

When managers were given a coaching tool, the number one reason they gave for not using it was lack of time. But time wasn't the issue; they just hadn't recognized all the opportunities they had to apply it. When they reframed the situations they were looking for—for example, "a conversation about a client" rather than "a one-on-one coaching session"—transfer rates soared.

It's all very well being given a tool in a classroom, but unless we make it blindingly obvious when and where it can be used, it won't stick. People need help to recognize how something they learned in one situation can be used in a different environment. In Mary L. Gick and Keith J. Holyoak's problem-solving research, providing participants with a hint about how an existing method could be used to solve a new problem saw success rates soar from 20 percent to 92 percent.

We can boost the power of training by teaching participants to spot opportunities to apply what they've learned and by giving them take-home tasks that are built into the workflow. Specific missions, based on real-world situations, make transfer a no-brainer.

Prime for success

Human brains are surprisingly malleable: Our behavior and performance is constantly affected by what's going on around us. Context can even alter something as fundamental as general knowledge.

For example, a university professor primed his students to imagine themselves as either a professor or an assistant. Remarkably, those primed to think about the characteristics of a professor scored 15 percent higher on a test of general knowledge than a control group. Priming certain characteristics has a significant impact on the way people approach a task, and we can use this to our advantage in training.

Before and during an event, we can prime participants to think of themselves as resilient, reflective, and resourceful—all are traits of great learners. We also can develop specific tools to prime certain mindsets. In the same way that we have a different approach to a task if we're holding a pen or a hammer, structured tools help people solve problems in different ways.

Learn little and often

Bite-sized learning is proved to produce 17 percent greater transfer and is 30 percent cheaper than a traditional approach, with less time out of the office and lower delivery costs. It also delivers twice the return on investment. Not only do we learn and remember more when taught in smaller chunks; a little-and-often approach gives participants more opportunities to practice what they've learned.

We're more engaged with learning when we can choose how and when we do it. Allowing people to pick sessions most relevant to them will give the best chance of success.

There is a way to create lasting change. The key lies in taking people on a journey of discovery that focuses on changing habits so they can solve real-life problems.

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