



# Corporate training is broken – fix it!

Developing deeper levels of performance through structured reflective practice can be transformative, argues **Phil Squire**

**C**orporate training is broken; so why are you still doing it? That's was the question raised by my colleague, Libby Drake, in the March 2014 edition of *TJ*. Despite an annual training spend of some £50 billion, sustained behavioural change in the workplace remains notoriously difficult to achieve.

Quoting a study by Dr Brent Peterson<sup>1</sup>, Drake raised a key issue that revolves around training design and the way that learning is delivered and embedded. The Peterson study indicated that 25 per cent of learning effectiveness comes from the learning event itself, 25 per cent from the preparation and 50 per cent from follow-up activity; yet the bulk of spending, effort and



engagement time within most organisations focuses on the actual learning event, potentially wasting much of the opportunity. Conducting training events in isolation may not only be an expensive waste of budget, but can do more harm than good, according to Drake. “You are setting them up to fail,” she declares.

So, how do we avoid such pitfalls? One way to boost outcomes from training is for organisations to include preparation for the learning event along with appropriate follow-up activities, because this is much more effective in helping participants change behaviours in the workplace. “A successful approach involves three stages: preparation, training and follow-up,” Drake emphasises.

She argues that this need not necessarily be a

drain on the budget; it doesn't automatically add cost to have a manager follow up with coaching or mentoring as part of a training programme, perhaps via monthly or weekly chats. Another approach that also works well is the “peer support group”. Technology, too, can play a role both in embedding learning and keeping costs down, because participants can in many instances engage in the process at their own pace, in their own time.

### Sales training under scrutiny

Sometimes, though, training needs root and branch change. Sales training, in particular, suffers from its own specific challenges. Employers have long recognised that traditional training has been losing its efficacy in terms of enhancing sales performance.

Moreover, lack of even basic skills has been a perennial problem among salespeople. According to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills reports in 2011 and 2013, research among employers identified a worsening situation: the surveys found that 62 per cent of job applicants for sales roles lacked customer-handling skills in 2013, up from 56 per cent in 2011.

Stereotypical approaches to training such as putting a whole team on yet another sales training course, without first understanding individual and team skills gaps, is a waste of time both for the participants and the company. Paul Devlin, a director at global data giant SAP, argues that “the reality is that six to eight weeks later, people are back to the same habits they were doing before.”

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He maintains that the best models embed the learning and empower the individual, ensuring that participants understand the principles of what is being communicated and are helped to apply it to their everyday experience.

This raises the issue of whether salespeople are receiving enough training in the first place, the possibility that the training is not being embedded effectively, or potentially that the training they do receive is not the right kind in the first place – or,





perhaps more likely, a combination of all three. So, could the solution lie in a more radical change of direction?

Arguably, sales leadership is now at a tipping point and this has helped move transformational sales strategies up the agenda. In part this stems from a need to address new dynamics within the sales landscape: customer empowerment has altered the balance of power between buyer and seller, while executives operate in an increasingly complex business environment that requires them to be agile and adaptable. This means that sales leaders need additional competencies such as critical thinking and creativity, rather than purely functional knowledge. In today's fluid world, actual knowledge may be, in many instances, 'disposable'; how to acquire it and use it is not.

### Education versus training

Moreover, sales is playing an increasingly strategic role within the boardroom; sales leadership is now not only about executing strategy, but also helping to shape it. Thus, while corporate training may be facing something of a watershed, in contrast sales education has grown significantly in importance. The evidence for this can be seen in the burgeoning number of business school sales programmes that have sprung up in the past few years and this trend is now transferring across to the corporate sector.

A joint paper in the *Journal of Marketing Education* from Cranfield School of Management, Middlesex University and Consalia<sup>3</sup> argues that, unlike sales training provision from industry, the unique combination of academic research-led education, consulting thought-leadership and business expertise can create a powerful framework for transforming sales performance and developing the selling skills and competencies appropriate for today's business environment.

The authors note that a recent review of sales training by Lassk, Ingram, Kraus and Di Mascio advocated that salespeople should have more input into their training programmes and be engaged both in content development and delivery. Such self-directed learning can help address the challenge of individual idiosyncrasies in learning by providing an individualised approach that is learner-centric and takes into account personal and contextual circumstances in the sales organisation.

### Work-based learning

One way to implement self-directed learning is through work-based approaches that involve reflective practice and learning from meaningful

experiences – that is, 'the real world'. Work-based learning (WBL) is in many ways the ultimate methodology for transfer of learning; it's this process that can successfully lead to personal transformation and a mind-set change.

WBL involves some form of project requiring the learner actually to apply key principles to their day-to-day role. Much of the benefit comes from doing something on the job and learning from analysis and reflection on the outcomes – what has or hasn't been achieved.

In this way, WBL benefits not only the learner but also the organisation as new ideas and behaviours are conceived and spread through an organisation, facilitated by the networks formed amongst the participants in the programmes and beyond. Indeed, we already have considerable anecdotal evidence of this effect from several large corporations.

One solution built around this WBL concept of a 'learning journey' is especially suited to the fast-changing world of sales development. It is being pioneered by global corporates such as SAP, Sony Mobile Communications and Toshiba, in the context of transformation training for sales professionals and sales leaders respectively.

These organisations are among a growing number that have begun to embrace new Masters programmes, designed and delivered by Consalia in conjunction with Middlesex University but shaped by the clients themselves. Middlesex University is home to the Institute for Work-Based Learning and is internationally recognised for innovation and expertise in professional and work-based learning.

### Boardroom research

The genesis of the concept can be traced back to 2004-2008 and my own research-based doctoral thesis, which focused on exploring the question 'How do C-level executives want to be sold to?' This work has subsequently been extended via our own 'Voice of the Customer Interviews'. We found that, in the UK, 80 per cent of C-suite executives interviewed felt that less than 10 per cent of salespeople met their expectations; the comparable figure for the rest of the world was 73 per cent.

While such figures represent a damning indictment of the perceived quality of the sales profession and the way salespeople have been trained to operate, our research has also revealed a set of values and mind-sets that underpin the sales strategies and interaction approaches that senior executives seek in salespeople.

The aim of the programme is to apply world-class, leading-edge sales thinking and research to

### References

- 1 B. D. Peterson, 'Current Learning Practices Don't Work: The 4R Learning Model Does', Peterson-Gillespie International, 2013.
- 2 J. Marcos-Cuevas et al, 'Enhancing the Professional Mindset of Future Sales Professionals: Key Insights From a Master in Sales Transformation', *Journal of Marketing Education*, May 2014



## Salespeople should have more input into their training programmes and be engaged both in content development and delivery

participants' personal and business goals within their own organisations. It comprises a series of modules conducted over a two-year period, each consisting of a facilitated workshop, followed by a work-based assignment and a final submission in the form of a Master's project thesis.

This modular structure is designed to provide an opportunity to develop deeper insights into participants' professional practice by fostering a culture of continuous critical questioning around what does and does not work, in order to blend insights from research in sales with personal experience. Participants are supported in a number of ways including mentoring and through peer support groups.

For instance, the twin objectives of empowering the individual and embedding self-learning to drive behavioural change and enhance performance are key objectives of Paul Devlin's approach to coaching his 22-strong team. In many ways, these aims echo the journey he himself is undertaking by participating in the Masters programme at SAP, which sits at the pinnacle of the organisation's own sales academy structure.

### Learning diaries

He explains that the 'learning journey' built into the Masters involves various ways of reinforcing insights gained during the programme, including keeping a 'learning diary', as well as a real focus on personal and team reflection. A learning diary is a simple but effective concept: a collection of notes, observations and thoughts built up over time that often results from a period of study, learning and work experience.

The aim of the diary is to help participants engage in 'reflection' about their learning. Consequently, it needs to be more than simply a descriptive account of what participants actually did as part of a programme; it's an opportunity for them to communicate their thinking process – how and why they did what they did, and what

they know and think about what they did.

It focuses on the concept of a 'critical learning experience', that is to say one that is not routine and requires participants to draw upon their knowledge and skills in order to respond to it; as a result, it tests or extends their learning. However, it remains private for the personal benefit of the participant only and is not assessed as part of the programme.

Devlin has embraced the concept. He argues that building in time to reflect on issues raised by the learning – on a daily, weekly and quarterly basis – embeds the experience and provides an opportunity to apply insights to the participant's day-to-day role. "It's important to prove a new outcome as a result of understanding the theory."

An example of this interchange between theory and practice can be found in Devlin's experience as part of a module on coaching, which he found useful in his own role, despite being an experienced coach. His research included a survey amongst his team, soliciting feedback in order to understand more about how his own coaching efforts – outside of the normal weekly routine of deal and opportunity reviews – are received. "The response was positive," he reports. "The feedback I have continued to receive is that coaching is a strength and that it is a great way to encourage trust between the coach and the team member."

Nevertheless, the responses offered valuable insights that have enabled Devlin to develop his skills still further. Principally, they revolved around the amount of "hand-holding" he should offer during coaching sessions. Previously, his approach had always been to err on the side of supporting team members to work to find their own answers to problems. As a result of input from the team, Devlin now understands that colleagues also want him to help provide more of the answers. "They suggested that I could help the conversation along by including my own thoughts," he admits.

### Extended benefits

In conclusion, it's worth noting that effective education programmes can have positive effects beyond simply embedding learning effectively. For example, Carl Day, a sales director at Toshiba Tec UK, reports wider business and talent-management pluses such as the PR benefit of his team being seen as more professional and more ethical as a result of participating in a Masters. Importantly, Toshiba's willingness to invest in the programme for its dealers has enhanced loyalty amongst the network and, in turn, made it easier for the dealers to attract and retain the best talent. Effective education delivers a genuine business benefit on many levels. **TJ**

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