

Why development training doesn't work by Tim Sparrow

First, an admission. I succumbed to the temptation of a catchy headline. It would probably have been more accurate to use the heading: "Why most development training courses don't work". I am not suggesting that all attempts at development training are a waste of time. Some, such as skilled executive coaching in a well structured format, I believe are highly effective. What I am suggesting is that most development training courses for groups as currently delivered don't work.

When you think of how much is spent on "management development", "leadership development" and similar courses, this is a fairly radical suggestion. It suggests that British business is throwing away many hundreds of millions of pounds each year. Why on earth would that happen?

First consider the notion that there are four determinants of the quality of human performance in any role and at any task:

- Knowledge
- Attitudes
- Skills
- Habits.

Each of these needs to be right to generate effective performance.

When I introduce the KASH model to employees of business and government organisations and then ask them "Which of these does your organisation address in its training provision?", the answer is almost invariably "Entirely knowledge and skills. Attitudes and habits are not addressed at all." So then I push, and say "OK, that may be true for training overall, but what about development training specifically?" And still the answer comes back: "Entirely knowledge and skills. Attitudes and habits are not addressed at all."

"We have already seen that each of the four KASH elements needs to be right in order for performance to be optimised. Therefore, ignoring two of the four elements means that you are bound not to get to where you want to get to. Unless you are dealing only with people whose attitudes and habits are ideal before you start and who are deficient only in the necessary knowledge and skills, which is very rarely the case.

So why on earth do the designers and deliverers of development training shoot themselves in the foot in this way, condemned before they start to fail to reach their training objectives? On the face of it, it seems daft. What can be the cause of this fundamental aberration? I believe that there are eight main reasons.

(1) **An overly cognitive and mechanistic view of human nature.**

In other words, the prevailing view of what determines human behaviour is not based on the KASH model, but is cognitive behavioural in nature: if people know what they need to know and have acquired the necessary skills, then they will automatically behave as required. The significance of attitudes and habits (and feelings) is entirely overlooked.

(2) **Habit: this is what people have traditionally focussed on.**

This is how we were trained/developed, and if as a result we are now senior enough to be taking decisions about the format of development training, then clearly this was the right way to do it, and what the next generation needs too.

(3) **Difficulties of measurement.**

Until recently people have not been able to identify the relevant attitudes, or to measure them, but you can give someone an exam to test their knowledge or a test to evaluate their skills. Measurement allows you to decide where your training should begin and helps you find out where it has taken the trainees to at the end.

(4) Moral scruples about judging, and intervening to change, people's attitudes.

There is a radical and libertarian streak in many of us which is not comfortable with the notion of employers evaluating their employees' beliefs and attitudes, still less requiring them to alter their beliefs and attitudes and hold particular ones prescribed by the employer. And yet, when in 2004 certain police cadets were shown to be racist, there was general agreement that they should be expelled from the force, that being racist was not compatible with being a fair-minded police officer. So at some level we do recognise that attitudes are relevant to job performance, and a legitimate concern of management.

(5) Ease of intervention.

You can give someone a book or a manual to increase their knowledge, or a training course to develop their skills. But people don't know about facilitating people to change their attitudes if they wish to do so, and they know that changing habits takes a long time. Furthermore, you can try to inject knowledge and skills into someone, but changing attitudes and habits can only be done by the person themselves. Skilled facilitation rather than straightforward instruction is therefore required.

(6) Desire for control.

One of the corollaries of the fact that changing attitudes and habits can only be done by the person themselves is that the outcome of the development process is up to them, and out of the control of the development trainers. This can be uncomfortable for those who like to be in control.

(7) Succumbing to senior management time pressure.

Changing one's attitudes or one's habits tends not to be an instantaneous affair. Both tend to take longer than the acquisition of knowledge or skills. (To change one item of habitual behaviour, to change the unconscious 'default setting', can take about three weeks – not surprising when you consider that we have probably been behaving in this habitual way since we were ten or so.) Any development process that addresses attitudes and habits is therefore likely to take longer than one that confines itself to inculcating knowledge and skills. But we all want quick results, and it takes some courage in a Learning and Development Manager to say to his seniors: "Yes, I can do something in a fortnight or so, but it will be a waste of your money because it won't actually do the business, and if you want an intervention which has a reasonable chance of achieving what you want then you will be looking at something which is going to take three months and more."

(8) Misguided economizing.

Development programmes which address attitudes and habits as well as knowledge and skills usually cost more, for four reasons.-

- a) It is not a question of attitudes and habits *instead* of knowledge and skills, but of attitudes and habits *as well* as knowledge and skills. You are going to be doing something additional rather than something alternative, and that is going to have cost implications.
- b) As we have just seen, it is going to take longer, and that means it is going to be more expensive.
- c) As we saw in (5) above, you are going to need skilled facilitators rather than trainers, and they take longer to develop and therefore cost more.
- d) Because the identity of the attitudes and the habits that need changing varies from person to person, much of your intervention will need to be individually based rather than group based, and will therefore be more expensive.

The problem is that spending £x on something that doesn't work rather than £2x on something that does work is a rotten way to save money. What you are doing instead is throwing it away. Luckily, addressing attitudes and habits as well as knowledge and skills is going to have a significant and measurable effect on performance, and therefore the extra expenditure is easier to justify.

Having reviewed these eight reasons, it seems a bit more understandable that so much development training should be of a format that is bound not to work. But what do we need to do now to alter this state of affairs? How do you design development training that does work?

If we are to set about designing development programmes that do work, then we need first to identify which of these eight “reasons” are just explanations, and which are to a degree justifications, and need addressing. I believe that with numbers 1,2,6,7 and 8 we can take the attitude: “This is misguided. Do it different.” But numbers 3,4 and 5 contain elements that need addressing and being provided for in any future programmes. Let us take them one by one.

(3) Difficulties of measurement.

I suggested above that “until recently people have not been able to identify the relevant attitudes, or to measure them”. There is an implication there that something has happened recently which means that this is no longer the case. What is that?

For me, it is the advent of the notion of emotional intelligence, the increasing realisation of the significant correlations between levels of emotional intelligence and levels of performance, and the availability of well designed measures of emotional intelligence. Now I am the first to acknowledge that for many of the promoters of EI it has nothing to do with attitudes, but at the Centre for Applied Emotional Intelligence we see the main determinants of emotional intelligence as being attitudinal in nature. Following Timothy Gallwey, we believe that **Effectiveness = Potential - Interference** and that all human beings, bar the brain damaged and the psychotic, are capable of acting with emotional intelligence. Most of the time, of course, we do not because of our internal interferences, which are misguided beliefs and attitudes adopted in childhood but surviving unproductively into adulthood.

Measuring someone’s emotional intelligence, therefore, is – or ought to be – tantamount to identifying the extent and nature of their interferences.; certainly that is what is done by the Individual Effectiveness questionnaire (IEq), which is the measure we use.

The attitudes which have the most profound effect on performance are those measured by the first two scales of the IEq: Self Regard (same as self esteem) and Regard for Others, which together define what Transactional Analysis refers to as a “Life Position”. Somebody’s life position tends to affect all other aspects of emotional intelligence. In addition at the Centre for Applied Emotional Intelligence we have identified eight attitudes which constitute a mindset conducive to emotional intelligence. (We call them the Eight Principles of EI. To give an example of their flavour, the first is “We are all of us in control of and responsible for our actions”. They are far from new; indeed they are no more and no less than a codification of the principles and assumptions of humanistic psychology.) The IEq does not measure them directly, but exploring someone’s IEq responses helps to identify which principles they find it most difficult to adhere to and when.

It is therefore no longer the case that we do not know what attitudes are conducive to effective performance, nor that we do not know how to find out where people stand on them.

(4) Moral scruples about judging, and intervening to change, people’s attitudes.

These we often encounter when people are introduced to the eight principles of emotional intelligence, but they tend to be resolved when we are clear about the eight principles’ ontological status, in other words what they are and what they aren’t. (1) They are not descriptive: we do not suggest that people habitually behave in a manner that conforms to the principles. On the contrary, because we all have our interferences, and because the norms of the culture we live in are on the whole incompatible with the principles, a lot of the time we don’t. (2) They are not prescriptive: we do not suggest that people ought to subscribe to these principles. People are entitled to believe whatever they want to believe, and to hold whatever attitudes they wish. (3) They are correlational. We observe

three connections between holding the principles and acting with emotional intelligence. (a) To the extent that you subscribe to the principles, you will find it easy to behave with emotional intelligence, i.e. to be good at self management and relationship management. Hence you are likely to be happier, healthier and more successful. (b) To the extent that you do not subscribe to the principles, you will find it difficult to behave with emotional intelligence. (c) Whenever someone behaves in an emotionally unintelligent way, it will always be found on examination that they have breached one or more of these principles.

We are not, therefore, in the business of intervening to change people's attitudes. Rather, what we do is to help people recognise the attitudes they hold, and we point out the connexion between those attitudes and behaving with emotional intelligence, which leads to effective self management and relationship management and therefore to high performance, and in the long run promotes health, happiness and success. The degree to which they then choose to set about changing their attitudes, and the extent to which they allow them to determine their choice of behaviour, is entirely up to them. Their autonomy is respected. Indeed, their autonomy in psychotherapeutic terms is enhanced, because they are making conscious choices rather than behaving in a driven or habitual unconscious way.

(5) Ease of intervention.

As I pointed out above, "you can try to inject knowledge and skills into someone, but changing attitudes and habits can only be done by the person themselves. Skilled facilitation rather than straightforward instruction is therefore required." And, "because the identity of the attitudes and the habits that need changing varies from person to person, much of your intervention will need to be individually based rather than group based." Also, "changing one's attitudes or one's habits tends not to be an instantaneous affair. Both tend to take longer than the acquisition of knowledge or skills." The necessary interventions will therefore be staff intensive in terms of numbers as well as of quality. Not all organisations will have the necessary numbers of skilled staff in post at the moment to start addressing with their own resources attitudes and habits as well as knowledge and skills.

At the Centre for Applied Emotional Intelligence we attempt to address this issue in two ways. First, we recognise that not all the support which individuals will need over time to go through the lengthy process of habit change without falling by the wayside (think of New Year's resolutions!) needs to be highly skilled and professional. So after the initial exploration of their IEq results with a professional, and their making a 21 day commitment to change a particular item of behaviour relating to the particular aspect of EI which they wish to develop, we ask them to choose a buddy to support them through the process. This can be their spouse, a colleague, a friend – it doesn't matter as long as it is someone whom they trust and with whom they feel free to be open. The buddy is given a copy of the 21 day commitment, and the two make contact regularly through that period to support the habit changer, and to help iron out any difficulties which may arise.

The buddying system to a degree reduces the amount of professional help required for habit change, but there will still be a requirement for skilled professional input into the programme of attitude and habit change. So the Centre has for six years been running the only training course in the world (so far as we know) for professional EI practitioners, an action learning based course running over nine months. This allows large organisations to develop the necessary skills in house by sending their own specialists on this course, and also has generated a body of skilled consultants who can support smaller organisations to address attitudes and habits in their development programmes and therefore to have a much greater chance of a successful outcome.

An executive coaching programme based around emotional intelligence development and starting from the respondent's IEq results is a singularly effective intervention. So another strategy for building the necessary skills base is for those organisations which already use coaches to get them accredited in the use of the IEq.

So: there is no longer any excuse for focussing development programmes on knowledge and skills alone and failing to incorporate attitude change and habit change. Learning and development managers now need to be brave enough to stand up to their senior management and be frank: effective development which addresses all four of the KASH elements is more expensive and will take longer, but it works, and it is now do-able. Whereas development programmes focussing on knowledge and skills alone are cheaper and quicker, but don't really work (as we see from the recurrent "transfer of training" problem) and therefore are an extravagance, in that to an extent they represent money thrown away.

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