

**I**n 1992, Mary Broad and John Newstrom demonstrated in their classic text *Transfer of Training* that it's line managers, not trainers or even participants, who wield the greatest influence over whether training produces enduring improvement in workplace performance. Or, in other words, if it *works*.

If this strikes you as slightly counter-intuitive, reflect for a moment on your own experience.

You have probably attended many courses. How often did you enrol for the programme with your boss's expectations of improvement ringing in your ears? And how frequently have you been obliged to convert new learning into better performance?

As Broad and Newstrom observed, trainers may be highly influential in determining the quality of learning but it is line managers that are mainly responsible for the powerful transfer effects that turn it into performance.

*Transfer effects* are those influences that impel the learner to do something constructive with his new knowledge or skills. It is a blanket term that covers a range of inducements from implicit threats to explicit rewards. It embraces a spectrum of managerial techniques from setting clear expectations of 'performance' to intense scrutiny of outcomes. They can invoke hope, excitement or even trepidation but, above all, they align the interests of the learner with those of their organisation. And the evidence is that they work.

When Motorola Inc introduced Quality Assurance, it found that plants delivered a return of \$33 for every \$1 invested where senior management reinforced training. In contrast, plants that provided the same training but without the management-led follow-up generated a negative return.

A similar study at Xerox demonstrated that trainees' retention of new skills fell to a disappointing 13 per cent if managers failed to provide coaching, support and recognition as these skills were being applied.

Given the absence of equivocation in Broad and Newstrom's findings and the weight of evidence pointing to the power of transfer effects, it might be considered odd – or even negligent

– that more has not been done to persuade line managers to pick up this heavy responsibility. But the available evidence suggests that not only are things not getting better, they are actually getting worse.

Anecdotally, most trainers will tell you that fewer and fewer participants have a personal development planning meeting with their boss before attending a programme. Similarly, many buyers of L&D volunteer that one of the factors behind the continuing popularity of executive coaching is that line managers are investing less time in their colleagues' personal development. For the fortunate few, coaches can step expertly into the shoes of the absentee boss but, for the overwhelming majority, it's business as usual in the DIY shop, with predictable results.

Why, when we understand so clearly the pivotal role line managers play in turning training budgets into organisational 'gold', do we do so little to ensure that it happens? The answers aren't difficult to find.

Training solution designers don't do enough to draw line managers into the centre ground of the programme. It's not good enough that line managers are informed: they must be *involved*. L&D buyers can help by putting 'line manager engagement' at the centre of their requirements, and by awarding work to suppliers who diligently pursue strong transfer effects.

Above all, line managers must be helped to understand just how influential they are – for good or ill – in the matter of their colleagues' development. And then they must shoulder *all* the responsibilities that come with their pay grade.

Finally, organisations need to take a long, hard look at the incentives that shape managers' behaviours and dictate the way they spend their time. Until managers are rewarded as richly for attracting, developing and retaining quality people as they are for 'getting stuff done', they will continue to pursue their legitimate self-interest by investing their energies where it will do them the most good. Until then, other people's training and development will sadly remain a long way down their to-do list. ■



# TRANSFER AND APPLICATION

In a new series looking at the issues surrounding the transfer and application of learning, **Robert Terry** reveals the vital importance of line managers in making training work

**Robert Terry** is founder and managing director of ASK Europe plc, a global behavioural change consultancy. He can be contacted via [www.askeurope.com](http://www.askeurope.com)