

Marathon Man

Daniel Wain goes the distance with ASK Europe's Robert Terry

"Conventional training methods deliver only a 4 per cent success rate. Ours are empirically proven to be ten times more effective."

So says Robert Terry, founder and MD of ASK Europe plc, a global behavioural consultancy. His definition of "effective" is a change in the complex behaviours that underpin leadership and have an impact on business transformation.

According to Terry, while most commentators agree that the return on investment of training courses is poor, most organisations – via their L&D function – seek to address this by revisiting the design or delivery of the course itself, before invariably running another.

So where else should L&D be focusing? "New research indicates that the inability of training to create significant measurable improvement in workplace performance is more likely to be caused by a failure to transfer and apply new learning rather than by the shortcomings of the learning experience itself," he says.

He believes that too many in training see the 'finish line' of an intervention as the final session of the course: "This assumes that the objective of the intervention is learning, but knowledge alone is insufficient and a training course is a damned expensive way of simply motivating someone."

For Terry, the 'finish line' is "that point in the future when it can be shown that those who attended the training consistently do something differently and better. Only when

the skills are transferred to, and implemented within, the workplace will organisational performance improve and the business see a return on its investment".

Terry and ASK Europe's approach is supported by various heavyweights, including Wick, Pollock, Jefferson and Flanagan: the quartet of gurus behind *The Six Disciplines of Break-through Learning*. These disciplines, conveniently called the 6 Ds, are:

- Define outcomes
- Design the entire intervention (not just 'the event')
- Deliver for application (with transfer to workplace front-of-mind)
- Drive follow-through
- Deploy active support (especially from line managers)
- Document results.

"Training that results simply in learning rather than transfer and implementation is fine," says Terry, "but the main beneficiary tends to be the individual not the organisation that paid for it." Plus, apparently, the L&D function: "Trainers are rewarded for the inputs they provide rather than for delivering the business outcomes

that are actually sought." Hence the focus on 'the event' itself and immediate success via 'happy sheets', which Terry describes as "a bit naughty, as we all know an entertaining trainer can orchestrate high end-of-course satisfaction".

It's clear that Terry feels too many in L&D only want a one night stand rather than anything more long-term or meaningful. For him, 'the event' has to be accompanied by both careful preparation and rigorous follow-through to help people develop new, effective ways of working. In other words, the learning is not an end in itself but a means to something more sustainable: real behavioural change.

Hence, the classic ASK leadership programme includes a six-week pre-workshop, and at least a 13-week post-workshop, process. "We're behaviourists," says Terry, "rather than educators. People are complex – they develop ingrained habits and resist change because it's uncomfortable. Conventional training methods alone aren't sufficient to overcome this natural, human resistance. Only 4 per cent of the people sitting in a classroom will experience an epiphany from that alone – most of us need more thought and direction.

"Yet until we learn to let go of the behaviours that stand in our way, our individual potential remains untapped and the potential success of our teams and organisations can't be realised."

He acknowledges the challenges: "Changing behaviour so that it's sustainable requires real effort, is more expensive, is riskier, takes longer and is more likely to fail.

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In fact, 90 per cent of all training interventions designed to change habits don't achieve their objectives. This explains why leadership performance has improved by only 20 per cent over the last 25 years, in spite of annual global expenditure on leadership development in excess of \$40bn."

It's the very lack of perceived ROI that first attracted this self-acknowledged "interloper in L&D" to the profession. Terry studied economics at Hull University, on a scholarship as a pilot from the RAF, before progressing to an MBA from Cranfield Business School. Until very recently, as well as leading ASK Europe, he was chief executive of the Adam Smith Institute, the 'liberal market policy think tank'.

He declares: "I had no track record in training, but I became

intrigued by an industry so lamentably poor at getting results: so much money, time, effort and resource invested and so little return on that investment."

So Terry founded ASK in 1994, initially as "a thought piece, with no real ambitions". In 1996, it went public and now employs 25 full-time employees and works with 60 associates around the world. More than 1,000 managers attend its programmes each year, from clients including GlaxoSmithKline, Coca Cola, BP and the Department for Work and Pensions.

Although ASK's offer has developed over time, its fundamental approach has remained simple: match every £1 spent on the classroom with at least £1 on transfer and application. "Learning can be achieved in minutes," says Terry, "but changing

behaviour can take months or even years. So our challenge has always been to transform an industry built around an educational 'sprint' into one that can support the behavioural change 'marathon'."

Action-orientated, Terry is also widely-read. While Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is his favourite book – in the original Spanish – ASK makes reference to some seminal business management texts. One major influence is the "ground-breaking" psychotherapist James O Prochaska, whose work helping people overcome behaviours such as substance abuse and eating disorders was recorded in the book *Changing for Good*.

It is from Prochaska that Terry developed ASK's Stage-based Behavioural Transformation process. "According to Prochaska, individuals move through various emotional stages as they seek to change patterns of behaviour," explains Terry. "To 'unlearn' is difficult. The stakes post-event are high – everything is stacked against the learner, who is striving to do things better but usually with scant support or reward."

Terry believes that L&D has missed a trick by not drawing upon sharp-edged research such as Prochaska's on how to achieve sustainable behavioural change. "For a drunk, failure is only one drink away. For a senior executive, it's only one meeting away. It takes just a specific set of circumstances to revert to old habits."

For Terry, that's where executive coaching kicks in: metaphorically picking one up and putting one back on the figurative wagon. Thinking of his love for most things Iberian, I'm reminded of the old Spanish proverb that habits are at first cobwebs, then cables.

Building on the work of Prochaska, ASK's SBT process assumes the following five stages:

- Pre-contemplation ("It isn't that I can't see the solution, I just can't see the problem")
- Contemplation ("I know I ought to do something and I'm

thinking about it but I'm not ready")

- Preparation ("I've made up my mind and I'm making detailed plans")
- Action ("I'm taking observable positive steps to change my behaviour")
- Maintenance ("I'm working hard with the support of others to avoid lapsing back into old ways").

"To succeed," says Terry, "people must use different solutions at different stages. Accordingly, at ASK, we're dogmatic about the process we follow, not the tools we use." The key is to match the intervention to the stage, so stimulating an appetite for change and for acquiring those beneficial new behaviours, while discouraging the relapse back into the comforting, if limiting, old ones.

Referring myself to the mantra that "our techniques are ten times more effective than conventional training methods", I note that the ASK website rather modestly states: "Not perfect. Just better."

Robert Terry himself, given his rather impressive CV, spacious offices and extensive client list, is similarly self-effacing. He is also patently self-assured and content with his lot. To reverse Winston Churchill's infamous ribbing of Clement Attlee, Terry is a modest man with little to be modest about. He dresses smartly but casually, and answers questions in like manner. He's generous with his time and candid with his opinions. He even – and this endears him to me most of all – personally provides a lift back to Milton Keynes station at the end of what all good politicians would call our 'wide-ranging discussion'. Thinking of good politicians, I naturally don't claim any false taxi expenses.

'Authenticity' is core to ASK's leadership development business; the company quotes the differing dictionary definitions on all its literature. 'Authoritative', 'trustworthy', 'dependable', 'accurate', 'genuine' and 'true' are all



fine words but it's the definition of 'authentic' in terms of a deed 'duly or properly executed' that seems most apposite: as much a definition of L&D's true role as that of an ASK 'authentic leader'.

Terry admits that ASK has reinvented neither training nor coaching *per se*: both form a key component of all its leadership programmes. "Our coaches are good but not necessarily better than others. What does make the difference is that we're in it for the longer-term, with our coaches providing that necessary nudge-back onto the change journey

when the dead hand of workplace bureaucracy hits."

Indeed it is the 'bolt-ons' around 'the event' that really differentiate Terry's approach to leadership development and coaching, turning a bog-standard run-around into a souped-up contender. For example, the ASK Elephant has been developed by one of the company's corporate partners, the Fort Hill Company of Delaware, and Terry describes it as "unique web-based follow-through technology".

Elephant is designed to spur action: every two weeks after 'the event', each delegate receives

an email from the prompting pachyderm asking three questions: What have you done so far? How much success have you enjoyed? What are you going to do next?

“Elephant attempts to address the inevitability of forgetfulness,” says Terry. Perhaps it also acknowledges the large mammal sitting, often ignored, in the corner of the L&D room.

In addition to technological tusks, ASK has developed other enhancements to its approach over the years. The latest is Continuum: a real-life coach available by phone throughout the post-event transfer and application period.

But despite all the undoubtedly innovative and beneficial bells and whistles, Terry is clear about the most significant influence in embedding new skills in the workplace: the line manager. “In the classroom, trainers are all-important but it is line managers who create the appropriate climate for longer-term behavioural change. It’s therefore imperative that they’re actively engaged before, during and after the intervention.

“Sadly, we’ve seen a decrease in line management involvement in L&D over the past decade.”

A worrying sign indeed, given all the compelling evidence, from the likes of John Purcell, that it is line managers who provide employees with the ability, motivation and opportunity to leverage their discretionary behaviour and thus have an impact on bottom-line business performance.

“When confronted by alternative and competing incentives, managers make rational choices, completely understandably, based on well-informed self-interest,” says Terry. “So, if a manager’s challenged during a training event to develop a more inclusive coaching style of leadership but the organisation continues to promote and reward managers who consistently demonstrate a results focus, with little regard for coaching, the impact of the training intervention will be muted at best.”

As the well-known organisational development professor Edgar Schein said in his seminal *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, the most powerful mechanisms for cultural embedding are what are measured, controlled and rewarded.

For Terry, “the effectiveness of training is impaired unless all the influences that shape managerial behaviour – reward, performance management, succession, and so on – are fully aligned”.

This seems so obvious, why isn’t it the norm? “There’s a conspiracy of silence, with all parties equally

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complicit in preserving the *status quo*. Trainers, L&D buyers, line managers, training participants and senior executives each play their part, collectively placing insufficient emphasis on transfer and application of learning and skills, with damaging consequences for all. But it’s nice and easy to do that, with no longer-term commitment, no difficult questions, no real sweat required of anyone. Change is hard. And besides, most parties rather like elegant amateurism.”

A recent survey in the US by Bersin Associates found that 72 per cent of participating organisations rated the business impact of training activities (Kirkpatrick’s Level 4 of evaluation) as “extremely valuable”, while a mere 10 per cent routinely measured it. Paradoxically, only 41 per cent thought immediate end-of-course participant satisfaction (Kirkpatrick’s Level 1) to be an important measure, but 81 per cent did routinely measure that. For Terry, this contradiction lies at the heart of the evaluation debate. “All

parties need to focus on the output of L&D. They must identify the critical incidents that will achieve business outcomes, and factor these into intervention design if they’re to have any chance of having a real impact upon the business.”

Terry stresses that he is not ‘anti-trainer’. He simply believes the profession needs to re-focus upon output, transforming itself into ‘follow-through managers’. “If, overnight, L&D was to be funded purely upon outcome not input, you’d see a similarly instantaneous transformation. You’d have to, otherwise the entire function would be scratched out by the CFO’s sharp pencil. And that time will come. And it will be deserved.”

Given the current economic climate, is Terry finding his proposition an easier sell, particularly to those spoilsport bean-counters? “A decade ago, ours was a hard and lonely, uphill path, in a commodity market driven by cosy, established supplier-client relationships in the absence of hard evidence, and where any fancy bolt-ons were just seen as adding cost. But now it is getting easier, as L&D stops being allowed to be the only internal function not measured on its output.”

So do we finally have to bite the ROI silver bullet? Surprisingly, Terry doubts such a thing exists. “As an economist, I would need all else to be equal before measuring the impact of one element. You can’t do that with L&D. One can’t prove that any given programme had a direct impact, due to the cat’s cradle of other interlocking factors. One can say that an intervention helped but if the desired outcome was delivered, why attempt to prove a causal link? Why invest further money trying to count the angels on the head of the pin?”

Thus this most errant of economists would almost certainly agree with that most quixotic of scientists, Albert Einstein: “That which counts can often not be counted. And what can be counted often does not count.” ■