

The Coaching Controversy

By Neil Rackham



This White Paper documents the fact that, however excellent your classroom training, without good coaching, you're probably wasting 87 cents out of every skills dollar you spend.

I've overheard some curious conversations in airports, but rarely so intriguing as one that took place in Los Angeles between two ASTD members:

"Did you read the article on coaching in the August edition of the *Training and Development Journal*?"

"Yeah, on-the-job versus off-the-job. Some hard research for a change."

"It really shook up my ideas on coaching. It proved to me that coaching doesn't work and seminars are better."

"I'm glad I saw it. We've been planning next year's program, and we'd angled a lot of our training toward on-the-job coaching; but now I'm not so sure."

"I can tell you this. On-the-job training is messy as hell. Now I can prove it doesn't work. I'm going back to the good old classroom approach."

"Yeah. I'll probably do the same."

The Coaching Controversy

continued

I've been part of a team carrying out research into coaching effectiveness for the last seven years; so, the moment my plane landed in D.C., I rushed to my office to read the first research study I'd ever heard of which proved that coaching didn't work.

A Dangerous Misconception

I've read Jack Kondrasuk's article and I'm worried. Although he's scrupulously careful not to suggest that coaching is ineffective, I'm sure that many *Journal* readers will, like the pair in Los Angeles, draw some nasty conclusions. Because the decision of whether to use on- or off-the-job training methods is so fundamental, I would like to present some alternative evidence to help readers make a more balanced assessment. Jack's conclusions, apart from the very small sample on which they are based, rest on an assumption which every experienced trainer should question. He makes no distinction between knowledge and skill, saying, "Knowledge and skill were considered synonymous" and measures the results of the coaching by using a knowledge test which, he assumes, will also reflect skill level. This is a dangerous misconception.

There are three key factors which help a trainer decide whether to use on- or off-the-job methods. They are:

- 1 Knowledge versus skills objectives.
2. Need for reinforcement.
3. Learning overload.

Let's consider each in turn.

Knowledge Versus Skills

A central idea in training for the last 20 years has been that knowledge and skills are different and need different training methods. Reading a book about how to swim may give knowledge, but it's poor insurance for the unfortunate non-swimmer required to demonstrate skills when the boat sinks. Conversely, many people have skills without being able to verbalize knowledge. Some of the finest and most skilled people-managers I've met couldn't quote a single human relations guru if their lives depended on it. Knowledge and skill are fundamentally different.

How does this apply to coaching versus off-the-job methods? Just this — Knowledge can be taught in the classroom effectively and

The Coaching Controversy

continued

relatively inexpensively. No wonder Jack Kondrasuk concludes that classroom training is effective. He has measured only changes in knowledge.

Let's contrast this with skills. To simulate a skill in the classroom, the learner must perform, using role plays or similar methods. Such simulations have two major disadvantages:

- n They are seen as artificial, particularly by experienced or older learners.
- n There is insufficient time in the average program to allow the repeated practice necessary for acquiring a skill.

Because of this, many larger and more sophisticated organizations have moved their skills training out of the classroom into the job where the situation is realistic and the time scale allows repeated practice over an extended period. For example, five of our major clients, all in the Fortune Top 100 corporations, have moved an increasing proportion of their skills development into on-the-job coaching.

A pattern for the future is likely to be knowledge in the classroom, skills on the job. Jack's assumption that knowledge and skills are the same thing makes his evidence on coaching questionable. He's shown that it's better to teach knowledge in the classroom. Few advocates of coaching would disagree. What he hasn't shown, because he hasn't measured it, is the effect of coaching on skills. He's like the auto mechanic who complained: "I don't see how my brother could teach anyone to drive a car. Why, he doesn't even know how a rear-axle differential works." One more time: Possession or lack of knowledge is no measure of skill.

Need for Reinforcement

Perhaps the strongest argument for coaching is this: However good your skills training in the classroom, unless it's followed up on the job, most of its effectiveness is lost. The Xerox Corporation carried out several studies, one of which showed that, in the absence of follow-up coaching, 87 percent of the skills change brought about by the program was lost. That's 87 cents on the skills dollar. Knowledge training, on the other hand, generally shows a much smaller loss.

The reason for this painful finding lies in the nature of a skill. By definition, a new skill feels awkward and uncomfortable. It doesn't bring instant results. Think of any skill you've tried to change,

The Coaching Controversy

continued

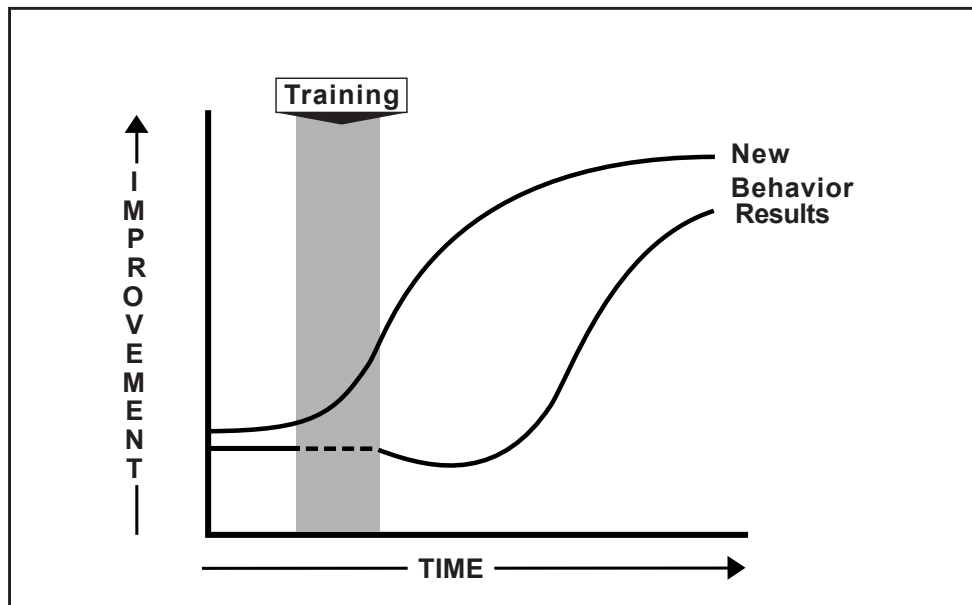


Figure 1. What *should* happen with a new skill.

such as your golf swing, your presentation style, or your methods of handling your children. Does the change bring instant success? Almost certainly not.

In learning most skills we go through an awkward period, illustrated in Figure 1, in which the skill doesn't feel natural and isn't bringing results. This period, sometimes called the "results dip" or "incorporation lag," is a bad time for most people. However, those who persevere gain the expected reward, as Figure 1 also shows.

If the learner continues with the new behavior, the skill feels more and more natural and begins to result in better performance.

Now the Bad News

What's this got to do with coaching? Just that coaching is the only way to keep a new skill reinforced and encouraged during the dismal period of the results dip. Without coaching, very few people can maintain a newly acquired skill. Let me take a personal example. I play a small musical instrument called a garkleinflötlein. It became extinct in the 17th Century because it's difficult to play and it sounds dreadful. My teacher says, "Neil, you lift your fingers up too high. I want you to keep your fingers as low as possible." My teacher is suggesting I try to change a skill. I dutifully lower my fingers, and

The Coaching Controversy

continued

do you think it sounds better? Not on your life. I'm in the results dip. The new behavior feels awkward and doesn't bring results. If I continue to be coached by my teacher, if I keep trying to lower my fingers, in the end my skills will improve, feel good, and even sound acceptable to the listeners. To be honest, I haven't had a music lesson in months; and, because it sounds so much worse when I do the right thing, I've abandoned the new skill and gone back to the comfortable old way. I'm like the learner in Figure 2.

When I'm in the results dip, I abandon the new skill. Our evaluation studies have shown that, particularly in sales training, classroom methods are almost useless for skills development without good follow-up coaching. Most salespeople try out the new skills for a few calls; find that they feel awkward; and, since the new method isn't bringing instant results, go back to their old ways.

However excellent your classroom training, without good coaching, you're probably wasting 87 cents out of every skills dollar you spend. Coaching is the only cost-effective way to reinforce new behaviors and skills until a learner is through the dangerous results dip. Once through the dip, when the new skills bring results, they will become self-reinforcing.

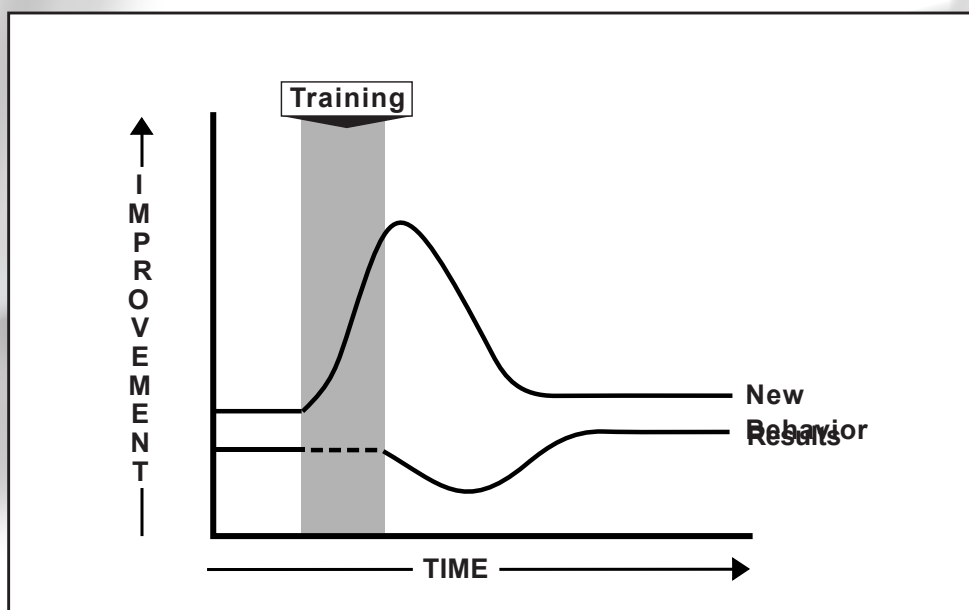


Figure 2. What *actually* happens to a new skill without coaching.

The Coaching Controversy

continued

Learner Overload

The final factor which trainers should consider when deciding the relative merits of on-the-job and off-the-job training is the sheer volume and complexity of the learning task. Once again, we have a distinction between knowledge and skill. Within certain limits, it's possible to cram knowledge into people at high pressure. I'm not recommending it, but it's possible. Skills are not like that. If you try to push in too much, too quickly, then the whole skill collapses. Most skill programs would be twice as effective if they contained half as much. We've brought about enormous improvements in the results of skills programs simply by cutting them down so that each small sub-skill can be adequately practiced before the next is introduced. Every really successful skills training package, such as XLS Professional Selling Skills or DDI Interaction Management, is simple and doesn't try to do too much in the time available.

Alas, given the sordid practicalities of the training world, most of your senior managers will measure your programs on the quantity of material, not the quality. Even when we've conclusively shown clients that it's better, in results terms, to learn one skill well rather than half-learn several, there's still great reluctance to cut material from programs. If the skills are complex, such as those in long-cycle selling, then there's no way a two-week classroom program can even hope to develop them. That's where coaching comes in. Honeywell Europe developed a coaching program which allowed managers to spread sales skills development over a 13-week coaching cycle, so that each sub-skill could be practiced on the job for several days before a new one was introduced. Basic training in the classroom could then concentrate on knowledge areas and on developing a few key foundation skill areas which managers reinforced and developed as part of the coaching cycle. So, coaching has an essential role in skills development, especially where the complexity of the skill is high.

Bottom-Line Results

In one respect, Jack Kondrasuk and I are in total agreement. He ends his article with the words: "Trainees look at the end results of their actions. We must, too, in selecting the best method to train our management personnel." His study, although it doesn't use

The Coaching Controversy

continued

bottom-line measures, suggests that the end results of coaching might be disappointing. Can I produce evidence to the contrary? I'm grateful to Xerox Corporation for permission to quote from a study carried out in their Newcastle branch on the effectiveness of coaching.

Newcastle branch, with 35 salespeople, was a poor performing unit and had been so for several years. Conventional classroom training had not improved results, so Xerox management decided to implement a coaching program. One was designed in which managers in the branch were taught methods for analyzing selling skills and systematically coaching their salespeople. As the results of Figure 3 demonstrate, the two-month, on-the-job coaching program greatly improved productivity. The branch, which had been trailing at 16th out of 17 in productivity ratings, moved to top place. Even more significant, from needing 48 calls on customers to achieve an order, the branch moved to taking an order from every 24 calls. This increase was one of quality and skill, not just more business from making more calls.

Naturally, every good trainer should be skeptical about evidence like this. Lots of factors make up branch performance. Can we *prove* that it was just coaching which brought this result? Of course not. The branch improved by 16 places, but an independent study commissioned by Xerox Corporation showed that at least five of those

	Position in Region (of 17 Branches)	Calls Needed to Achieve Each Order
Average level for 6-month pre-coaching period	16th	48:1
Month of on-the-job coaching	13th	32:1
Month 2 of on-the-job coaching	3rd	26:1
Average level for 6-month period after coaching	1st	24:1

Figure 3. Xerox Newcastle branch.

The Coaching Controversy

continued

places could be accounted for by non-training factors. Yet Xerox was convinced enough to contribute substantially to the \$750,000 research program into effective coaching techniques which we developed from this pilot. Today, many major corporations are putting a large slice of their training budget into on-the-job coaching.

So, to those two trainers in the L.A. airport, here's my message: Don't draw hasty conclusions that coaching doesn't work. It may be your only way to build an effective skills program, especially in difficult skills areas like selling.



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