



Practice Doesn't Make Perfect

Are you getting the most value out of your instructor-led training? Probably not. Here are three powerful and inexpensive ways to increase the impact of your training.





One Important Advantage

It was Mark Twain whose 1897 cable to the Associated Press memorably stated: “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

The same might be said about reports of the death of instructor-led training. Sure, e-learning has made tremendous strides in terms of its versatility, robustness, and ease of use. And more sales and service organizations are using some form of e-learning, especially to support agents’ knowledge of products and processes.

Still, the instructor-led workshop remains the unsung workhorse of the training industry. Many companies still rely exclusively on instructor-led training. And even the most sophisticated organizations – the ones that have truly embraced the investment in e-learning – often use a blended learning approach that integrates e-learning with instructor-led sessions.

This approach makes sense. Because despite all of the advances of e-learning, instructor-led training still offers one important advantage. When you’re training customer interaction skills – sales, customer service, or collections – a workshop setting still gives employees the best opportunity to practice these skills in the way that most closely simulates what they’ll have to do in the real world. And, as we all know, practice makes perfect. Right?

Well, not exactly.

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It was Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the NFL's Green Bay Packers, who said it best: "Practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect." Or, to put it another way, practice makes permanent. If you practice something long enough, you'll learn it. But if you practice it the wrong way, that's how you'll learn it.

So practice is only one half of the skill learning equation. The other, equally important half is feedback. Because without feedback that reinforces what learners are doing well and points out where they have opportunities to improve, you're more likely to produce behavior that's permanent than perfect.

Fair enough, you say. But isn't that why you have instructors in the first place? Isn't it their job to provide the quality feedback that learners need?

Of course it is. And many instructors do a fine job. But let's be realistic. How many students are in a typical instructor-led training session – six? 10? 16? 24? How much personalized attention and feedback can even the best instructor provide to each of these students? And while the instructor is providing individualized feedback and attention to one student, what's the rest of the class doing to advance their own learning?

Fortunately, there's a way out of this dilemma. There are three simple steps you can take to help your front-line representatives get the most value out of your instructor-led training – and improve the return on your training investment. These proven steps will help your agents learn how to learn. And, best of all, they don't require big bucks or fancy technology.

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To get the most value out of your instructor-led training, make sure that you teach your agents to listen, to assess performance, and to provide effective feedback. Let's take a closer look.

Listen

In the classic 1952 musical *Singin' In The Rain*, there's a wonderful scene that takes place as Hollywood is making the transition from silent movies to talking pictures. Silent film queen Lena Lamont is in the office of voice coach Phoebe Dinsmore. The vocal coach models the appropriate sounds with a resonant and theatrical tone. The film star responds with a voice that sounds like cats scratching on a blackboard.

Lena Lamont can't improve her voice quality because she can't hear the difference between herself and her coach.

Training is about closing the gap between current and desired performance. But learning doesn't begin until the learner notices that there is, in fact, a gap. Training professionals talk in terms of helping learners move from Unconscious Incompetence ("I can't do it and I don't even realize it") to Conscious Incompetence ("I'm aware of what I can't do").

For interaction skills in a contact center, the key to noticing a performance gap is listening. Learners need to be able to hear how they sound, and they need to be able to notice the differences between how they do sound and how they should sound.

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Here are three easy ways to help agents improve their listening:

Listen to good real-world examples. As you focus on each part of a contact, give your students an opportunity to hear examples of agents who are demonstrating and applying the appropriate skills.

Listen to real-world examples that aren't so good. Help your agents identify what's different between the model examples and the less-successful ones. Focus on both *what* agents say and *how* they say it.

Let agents listen to themselves. As you provide opportunities for active practice, let your agents record themselves so they can listen back and hear how they sound.

Assess Performance

If participants can listen to *what* an agent says and *how* he or she says it, then they can begin to assess agent performance in terms of your contact center's standards and expectations. In effect, you're teaching quality monitoring to new agents.

At first, this may seem like a radical notion. But only at first. After all, one of Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People is to "begin with the end in mind." And what better way to clarify your standards of performance than to let new agents apply those standards to calls and then compare their ratings with those of your internal Quality group?



We've found that in a surprisingly short period of time, new agents can begin to accurately assess performance that exceeds expectations, meets expectations, or falls short. And, more importantly, they understand why. Once this happens, you have gained the agents' buy-in and accountability in terms of improving their own performance.

Provide Feedback

If agents can learn to listen and assess performance, then they can learn to provide feedback. And when agents can provide feedback to each other, then you're really able to maximize the learning opportunities in your instructor-led training.

When we work with clients on their new hire training curricula, we teach front-line representatives how to provide feedback early in their training. We provide them with the skills they need to deliver straightforward Plus/Delta feedback that focuses specifically on what someone did well and on what he or she could improve.

From that point on, agent feedback continuously supplements and supports feedback from the instructor. So participants don't just practice new skills. As they practice, they also get the feedback they need to practice perfectly.



Give The Gift That Keeps On Giving

Many excellent training programs that teach people how to write begin by teaching them how to edit. There's a sound instructional principle here. After all, if learners can recognize and correct problems with other people's writing, then they should also be able to recognize and correct problems with their own. And learning how to edit your own writing is a critical skill in becoming a clearer and more effective writer.

In the same way, the skills of listening, assessing, and providing feedback are essential building blocks for developing skilled call center agents. When your agents develop these skills, they're better able to monitor and improve their own performance on an ongoing basis.

If you make these three skills part of your training curriculum, you'll give your agents a gift that keeps on giving – and one that keeps paying dividends on your training investment.

About The Elkind Group

The Elkind Group is dedicated to improving the performance of front-line sales and service teams. We help clients solve their most important performance problems, resulting in increased revenue, customer loyalty, and customer lifetime value.

The Elkind Group's approach integrates performance consulting, customized training, and executive coaching. We work with all levels of the organization to change mind sets, build skill sets, and create a culture committed to sustained performance improvement. For more information, visit www.elkindgroup.com.



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