

Learning from Disappointment: When Learning Solutions Fail to Deliver

By Jack J. Phillips, PhD

We are fortunate to have a unique vantage point within the learning and development community. We assist hundreds of organizations with measurement, evaluation and ROI. We bring accountability to learning. As a result, we have the opportunity to examine the success (and failure) of major programs in all types of settings. Our involvement with these organizations occurs in two ways:

- Conducting impact studies using a comprehensive measurement and evaluation process, including ROI.
- Reviewing studies conducted by our clients showing the success (or lack of success) of learning solutions.

More than 500 impact studies have been conducted or reviewed. Some studies show positive results; others are not so positive—often yielding negative returns on investment. Along the way, we have observed repeat patterns of issues that inhibit or enhance results. In every impact study, the major barriers, obstacles and inhibitors to the transfer of learning are always collected, revealing the impediments to success for a particular program. Even when the program is successful, issues are identified that prevent more impressive results.

Collectively, these two sources of data result in the following reasons why learning and development fail, listed from the most significant to least significant.

Lack of Alignment With Business Needs

No surprise here. The payoff of learning comes from the business measures driven by a specific learning solution. If the solution is not aligned or connected to the business measure, there will be little or no improvement linked to the solution. Too often, formal learning solutions are implemented for the wrong reasons—because of a trend, desire or perceived need that may not be connected to a business measure. For example, consider a request by a senior executive to develop leadership behaviors. The request may be based on a perceived behavior need and not necessarily a business need. If the executive cannot articulate specifically which business measures should improve as a result of the new leadership behavior, the program may not be connected to a business need. This is not to say that specific leadership behaviors are not important, but they should, at least for the most part, be driven by the need to improve a business measure if the solution is expected to add value.

Failure to Recognize Non-Learning Solutions

If the wrong solution is implemented, there will be little or no payoff connected to the solution. Too often, learning is perceived as a solution for a variety of performance problems when it is not an issue or it's only a part of the solution. Attempting to solve job performance issues with learning is a major

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problem when other factors such as reward systems, job design and motivation are the key issues. To overcome this problem, the learning staff must continue to focus on methods to analyze performance rather than conduct a traditional needs assessment.

Failure to Prepare the Environment for Transfer of Learning

Without the transfer of the learning to the job, there will be no performance change and the learning solution will usually fail. The transfer issue has been important in learning and development for many years. Unfortunately, studies continue to show that as much as 60 percent to 90 percent of what is learned is not transferred to the job. The reasons for lack of transfer are very complex, involving many different elements and issues. While multiple barriers always exist, usually little attention is provided until it is too late. The result: The barriers kill the success of an otherwise successful program.

Barriers must be uncovered as part of needs assessment and analysis. When workplace inhibitors are identified early, they can be addressed in the design, development, delivery and implementation of the solution.

Lack of Management Reinforcement and Support

Without management encouragement and support, participants will rarely implement new skills and knowledge in the work site. Consequently, the expected results may not be realized. The manager's role is very critical in the learning process. Many studies have shown that the two most powerful enablers to transfer of learning are the interactions between the manager and the learner prior to the solution and after the solution.

The problem often lies in the perceptions of managers about reinforcement and support. Some managers push back on this issue. Because their employees work in an empowered environment, managers should not have to probe and pry into each learner's individual application of skills. The participants should be empowered to use what was learned, and they should feel free to do so without needing encouragement from management. However, learning a new skill is a different situation. It requires encouragement and support from the immediate manager. Just a simple inquiry about the success of the learning solution and how it will be implemented into the work unit is usually sufficient.

Using this as backdrop, two important conclusions can be reached. First, managers do not usually realize the extent of their influence; and second, more actions are needed to make sure that managers understand their influence and what they can do to make changes.

Inadequate Objectives

Most learning solutions should be focused so that all stakeholders can concentrate on the results. Otherwise, the results may be less than desired. The focus begins with the objectives for the learning solution. These objectives should go beyond traditional learning objectives. Application and impact objectives need to be developed for some solutions when there is a concern about contribution. Application objectives define what must be accomplished on the job as a result of the solution. Impact objectives define the consequences of the application, expressed by business measures.

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When developed properly, these higher-level objectives provide important direction and focus for a variety of different stakeholders. For designers and developers, the objectives provide insight into the types of examples, illustrations, role plays, case studies and exercises that are needed to focus on application and impact—not just learning. The facilitators need detailed, higher levels of objectives so they can prepare the individuals for the ultimate outcomes of the learning experience, job performance change. With higher levels of objectives, participants will clearly see the outcomes of learning. Otherwise, they may be confused about how the solution will help the organization. The sponsors of the learning solution—key clients—need application and impact objectives so they can see the connection between learning and important business unit measures.

The Solution Is Too Expensive

When the fully loaded costs of learning are considered, sometimes the solution cannot generate enough monetary value to overcome the high cost of implementing the solution. Consequently, from an ROI perspective, the solution may be considered unsuccessful.

This issue is amplified when all the costs are included. Too often only direct costs are used. Today, many organizations include indirect costs such as prorated development costs, the use of facilities, the time of participants to attend learning solutions and administrative and overhead costs. These costs should be included because they are the actual costs, although some of them may not be visible or contained in a particular cost statement.

The good news is that many effective learning solutions can be implemented with low costs; they do not have to be expensive processes to drive business results. Some of the most successful learning solutions have very low costs.

Regarding Learning as an Event

A positive business impact connected to a learning solution must come from behavior change from the individual participant. Behavior change is not easily developed. When learning is considered a one-time event (e.g., a one-day workshop), the odds of changing behavior are slim. Without the behavior change, the business results are not generated.

Sometimes it is helpful to compare behavior change to bodybuilding. An occasional visit made to the gym will have little impact on the body. It takes continual workouts along with the proper motivation and support to be successful. Learning new skills is the same way. It must be a continuous process.

Participants Are Not Held Accountable

Participants in learning solutions must drive performance change if the program adds business value. Without their individual efforts, the solution will not be successful. When pressed for reasons for not applying new behavior, participants are quick to blame others. But that may not be the real issue. Historically, when there is lack of results, the learning staff comes under fire, and sometimes the immediate managers are blamed. While these groups may be the culprits, the participants usually share some of the responsibility. The participant's role in achieving results is often overlooked and deserves more attention. Participants do not always see their own change in behavior as their responsibility.

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Traditionally, participants are encouraged to become involved in the learning solution and learn the skills and knowledge offered. Sometimes they are asked (or may even be required) to apply the new skills on the job. Now, additional expectations are included. Not only should they apply what has been learned, but they should also achieve and report business results. Thus, their role is elevated from attending, learning and applying to actually achieving results and reporting them to the staff.

Lack of Commitment and Involvement From Executives

Without the commitment and involvement from top executives, learning will not reach its full potential, and major programs will fall short of their expectations. Commitment and involvement are critical. Commitment equates to resources allocated to learning and specific programs. Involvement is the presence and actions—the active role of the individual executive in the process. The business literature is laced with examples of top executives taking active roles in learning. When executives take very visible roles, others will do the same in the organization, and it will filter throughout the organization. It makes a big difference.

Failure to Provide Feedback and Use Information About Results

Employees often need feedback on their progress. Developers and designers need feedback on program design. Facilitators need feedback to see if adjustments can be made to delivery. Clients need feedback on the success of a learning program. All groups need feedback. Without it, learning may not reach expectations. The challenge is to provide a stream of information—as data are collected—to a variety of audiences to drive changes and improvements.

Conclusion

These 10 issues may be familiar, as they represent critical issues that must be addressed if learning is to live up to expectations and generate appropriate returns for the investment. Today, there is increased pressure to show the payoff of the investment in learning. Failure cannot be tolerated. Failure can be prevented. Results from learning solutions are more than just collecting data. Results-based learning is a process that must be practiced if learning is to be successful and respected in organizations

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