

# *The First Three Steps Are Easy*

## How to Achieve Permanent, Measurable Improvements in Performance

- Dennis E. Coates, Ph.D. -



The decades-long quest to transfer what is learned in the classroom to improved performance in the workplace has been a confounding one.

For one thing, it isn't easy to change behavior patterns, because they've been ingrained over time. To correct performance issues, new behaviors have to be introduced and consistently reinforced over the long term. This means following up programs with enough continued learning, feedback, coaching and accountability to stimulate the growth of new neuronal connections that eventually take the place of old ones.

Unaware of this reality, organizations have wasted billions of dollars annually investing in learning programs that fail to change behavior.

The greater challenge of the quest for this "Holy Grail" is that the solution doesn't involve fixing just one thing. A myriad of variables within an organization influence whether learning is reinforced until new behavior patterns are established. **Train-to-Ingrain** was designed to achieve permanent, measurable improvements in performance by optimizing aspects of training and development that impact on learning transfer:

- COMMITMENT – Support follow-up reinforcement
- COACHING – Prepare direct managers for their development role
- FOLLOW-UP – Integrate reinforcement programs with assessment and training programs
- ACCOUNTABILITY – Measure performance improvement and calculate ROI
- TRAINING FOR TRANSFER – Incorporate learning strategies that promote application and reinforcement of skills
- LEARNING NETWORKS – Coordinate support for reinforcement
- FOCUS – Identify training needs that will have a positive impact on business results
- CULTURE – Align the organization's policies and practices to support performance improvement

However, even decision-makers who've been burned repeatedly by failed programs may find this systems-wide strategy daunting. A predictable reaction: "This is too much."

The good news is that it's neither necessary nor desirable to try to improve all areas at once. The best approach is to get positive results quickly by doing three things, which can be accomplished in a very short period of time:

1. Acquire integrated assessment and training technologies that support ongoing skill reinforcement.
2. Involve direct managers in the learning process. Define their staff development responsibilities and hold them accountable.
3. Measure performance improvement. Assess skill areas before and after instruction to establish developmental goals and accountability.

These actions will produce immediate successes, and your organization can then build on this foundation with a gradual, tailored strategy to optimize the key areas that influence learning transfer. The purpose of this article is to explain how to carry out these three "quick start" initiatives effectively.

### **Quick Start Initiative #1 Acquire Integrated Assessment and Training Technologies that Support Ongoing Skill Reinforcement**

The immediate goal is to dramatically improve—in the near term—the ability of your developmental programs to create lasting improvements in workplace performance. As a minimum, your organization will need to put into place assessment and training programs that:

- Focus on the behaviors needed in the workplace
- Are compatible and integrated with each other
- Support ongoing feedback, continued learning, coaching and accountability during reinforcement

Laying the foundation for this technology infrastructure is relatively simple:

#### **FIRST – Acquire a versatile, economical multi-source feedback system.**

A robust performance feedback assessment system is absolutely essential, in which learners get feedback from the people who work with them. For assessing leadership, sales, service, team and other interpersonal skill areas, **20/20 Insight GOLD** is an ideal choice for **Train-to-Ingrain** because it provides quantitative assessment of areas of performance that are otherwise hard to measure. The system is completely



customizable and can support any type of feedback survey, so it can be integrated with practically any training program. It's economical enough to be used as often as needed for reinforcement, because you can purchase relatively inexpensive permanent individual licenses, permitting frequent feedback and repeat measurements at no extra cost.

**NEXT – Acquire a training program with resources that support an extended period of reinforcement.**

Whether developed in-house or purchased off-the-shelf, the ideal program provides access to online video behavior modeling, post-course exercises and other references to support successful application on the job.

**THEN – Integrate the assessment with the training program.**

Integration means that the performance feedback survey exactly describes the behavioral outcomes of the training program. Regardless of the training, 20/20 Insight GOLD is a versatile feedback survey platform that enables easy customization and administration of the survey.

**Quick Start Initiative #2  
Involve Direct Managers in the Learning Process**

At least four major factors affect individual performance:

- Self-awareness
- Competence
- Motivation
- Support

Managers are empowered to influence all these factors, and they lead people by doing so. When focused on developing competence, managers set an example, communicate expectations, demonstrate desired performance, give feedback, and coach performance. Most organizations expect their managers to fulfill these traditional staff development responsibilities. However, some managers still have the perception that performance improvement should be the exclusive responsibility of the training department. This is an erroneous mindset.

Trainers work hard to present the best possible learning programs. But they have the attention of learners for only a few days, while managers interact with their team members for years and can influence career advancement and other personnel decisions. This is why ***what direct managers do in the workplace influences individual performance far more than what trainers do in the classroom.*** The role of trainers is to introduce skills and behavior models. The reality is that trainers have practically no control over what happens back in the workplace, where new skills must be diligently applied in order to be ingrained.

Changing behavior patterns takes months, not days—even in ideal circumstances. Only the learner’s direct manager is in a position to give enough support, oversight, encouragement, feedback, coaching and reinforcement over the long term to change behavior. In most cases, how well the manager carries out this role will make or break the transfer of new knowledge into permanent improvements in workplace performance—no matter how much was invested in the learning programs.

Up front, you’ll need to do three things to draw direct managers into a “learning triangle” with their direct reports and trainers:

#### **A. Clarify the direct managers’ developmental responsibilities.**

The purpose of this step is to require direct managers to coach and develop direct reports—to make this a formal aspect of their responsibilities. These expectations should be communicated in writing by upper-level management:

- Communicate with trainers to be informed about and support assessment, learning and reinforcement programs
- Meet with direct reports before each assessment, training and reinforcement initiative to help them prepare to make the most of these learning opportunities
- Define expectations for direct reports and help them set learning goals
- Attend or review the training to refresh familiarity with the skills
- Set an example for the skills and behavior expected of direct reports
- Give direct reports ample opportunities to apply what they’ve learned in formal programs
- Encourage the efforts of direct reports
- Frequently observe the work of direct reports, paying special attention to aspects of performance that direct reports are trying to improve
- Give timely one-on-one feedback about workplace performance
- Help direct reports learn from workplace experiences, whether successes or shortfalls
- Recognize direct reports who improve their performance

Some organizations revise the job description; others issue a new set of “competency descriptions.” The goal is to overcome any uncertainty or reluctance direct managers may have.

#### **B. Prepare direct managers to be more effective performance coaches.**

Coaching subordinates to improve their skills and job performance is a traditional leadership role for managers. But many managers simply aren’t prepared to carry it out effectively. If your managers haven’t previously been expected to take responsibility for the day-to-day development of their direct reports, they may lack understanding, relevant skills and confidence.

The most effective immediate solution is an off-the-shelf one-day training program that explains what managers need to do and how to do it before, during and after training to reinforce the new skills of subordinates. Such a program would help managers develop the skills to effectively handle coaching moments. These consistent efforts by the manager ensure that direct reports ultimately change behavior patterns and improve performance.

An excellent adjunct resource is John Whitmore's how-to book, *Coaching for Performance* (2002), written specifically for managers and now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.

### **C. Hold managers accountable for carrying out their role as performance coaches.**

First, inform managers that they—and the learners themselves—will be held accountable for how much the direct reports have improved performance.

One effective way to establish accountability is to administer the brief 15-item performance feedback survey, "Developing and Coaching Others," available in the 20/20 Insight GOLD Survey Library. Using 20/20 Insight GOLD, it can easily be customized to fit the organizational culture.

The survey is an ideal precursor for a manager's coaching course. Using 20/20 Insight GOLD, administer the survey before training. Direct reports will provide respondent feedback, and the results will reveal areas of strength and needs for improvement of the direct manager. Let managers know that they'll be given an identical follow-up assessment in six to twelve months to measure improvement.

Another extremely effective method for holding managers accountable (while holding direct reports and trainers accountable as well) is described in Quick Start Initiative #3. We recommend using both methods.

#### **Quick Start Initiative #3 Measure Performance Improvement**

When executives invest heavily in any product or service to improve a vital aspect of operations, productivity or profitability, you'd expect at some point to hear the question, "Has performance actually improved? Was it worth all that money?" And what they're asking for is proof of results—not somebody's opinion about the program.

When it comes to training, the traditional way of evaluating impact is Donald L. Kirkpatrick's four-level model (2005), which recommends measuring four types of outcomes.

Level 1 focuses on *reaction*—participants' satisfaction with the program. End-of-course evaluations serve this purpose. Level 2 focuses on *knowledge*—what participants learned in the course. Trainers administer knowledge tests that focus on concepts and principles related to course content—very much like the exams used in high school and

college. While these evaluations can help trainers improve their programs, they fall short of showing whether the training actually improved workplace performance.

By contrast, Level 3 evaluations focus on *behavior*. They address the transfer of training—whether people are routinely performing in the workplace the skills they learned in the classroom. While this kind of evaluation can demonstrate whether a program has done its job, most organizations haven't settled on an effective solution.

However, there is a simple, economical method for generating performance improvement data.

### **BEFORE TRAINING – Administer a pre-course assessment.**

The feedback surveys used in a typical **Train-to-Ingrain** process are perhaps the most effective technique ever devised for measuring improvements in on-the-job performance. The procedure is simple. Set up a multi-source feedback survey consisting of questions that describe the behaviors taught in training. Administer the survey before training to gather feedback from participants' boss, coworkers and others. Let participants know that the survey will be administered again several months after training. This pre-course diagnostic helps participants set quantified, behavior-based performance improvement goals, so their minds are more focused during learning activities. Knowing that follow-up measurements will be taken later increases their attention and motivation as they work with trainers—the ideal mindset for learning.

### **AFTER TRAINING – Administer a post-course assessment.**

About six months after training, administer the first follow-up feedback survey, using the same respondent group. Since post-course assessments are derived from the pre-course assessment, scores may be easily compared. Improved scores will confirm improved performance. The quantitative and qualitative data will reveal whether areas of performance have improved. Learners and direct managers will find out whether ongoing reinforcement has had the desired effect. For continued feedback and measures of performance improvement, repeat the assessment at the twelve-month and eighteen-month marks.



This simple, commonsense approach to measuring performance improvement requires a technology that can support it: a fully customizable multi-source feedback survey system. Assessment items need to be tailored to exactly mirror the desired behaviors taught in the training program. In other words, assessment and training need to be integrated. Also, the assessment system should have inexpensive unlimited assessment licenses for each participant, which makes it possible to give them all the feedback they'll need after training without additional expense. The 20/20 Insight GOLD onsite feedback platform meets these requirements and is extremely easy to use.

## **FINALLY – Hold the key players accountable.**

Measuring performance improvement provides hard evidence of whether programs are changing behavior, making it possible to hold the key players in the “learning triangle” accountable:

- The learner, who must make a determined effort to change behavior patterns during the lengthy and sometimes frustrating period of reinforcement
- The direct manager, who observes and coaches the subordinate while providing opportunities to apply skills in an encouraging environment
- Trainers, who present behavior-based training that is optimized for skill transfer and who coordinate follow-up programs

Implementing these three simple, straightforward initiatives will profoundly improve the effectiveness of your training and development programs. As you learn more about **Train-to-Ingrain**, you’ll appreciate that getting started quickly is only the beginning. To achieve maximum results, you’ll need to implement more changes. Going forward, you can build on the foundation of these early successes to optimize learning support in all areas.

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## **References**

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Whitmore, John. *Coaching for Performance: Growing People, Performance and Purpose, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* (Nicholas Brealy, 2002).

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