Hello there!

The dictionary defines radical as follows:

(especially of change or action) relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something; far-reaching or thorough.

We believe that our approach to training, Bottom Line Training®, is rather radical. We've written about it in several articles. We've talked about it in our monthly webinars. We teach it in our 2-day seminar of the same name.

But what you might not know is that it was inspired by Stephen J. Gill's work on learning organizations, as summarized in his book Getting More From Your Investment in Training: The 5A's Framework. In this issue of our monthly e-news, we're excited to feature an article by Stephen Gill and his partner at Learning to be Great, James Stilwell.

Enjoy the read! Check out their website, there's a lot of cool resources there.

- Gauri

Gauri Thergaonkar, ZingTrain Community Builder
Getting Business Results from Employee Learning: The 5As Framework

By Stephen J. Gill & James Stilwell

The ideas that inspired Zingerman's radical Approach to Training.

Training and other types of formal and informal learning interventions (action learning, coaching, mentoring, internship, social learning, etc.) are not achieving their intended results. **On average, less than 20% of participants in training programs apply what they've learned to their jobs.** Part of the explanation for this is memory. At least half of what is learned is forgotten in hours and days after learning (Ebbinghaus Effect) unless that learning is reinforced in some way. Most of the remaining knowledge and skills are forgotten over time if there has been no practice and opportunity for application.

**Limited Impact from Learning**

Other explanations for a lack of impact from learning interventions are related to organization culture. According to Edgar Schein, **organization culture exists on three levels:**

1. deep underlying beliefs and assumptions
2. values and principles
3. symbols and artifacts

Obstacles to learning can be seen in each of these levels.

**Beliefs and Assumptions:** For example, at the level of beliefs, if leaders and managers hold the mindset that people can’t learn and grow, that people don’t change and whatever capabilities
they come with is what they are stuck with, then that’s what they will get from employees. On the other hand, if leaders and managers believe that people can learn and grow and become high performers, employees will continue to enhance their capabilities.

**Values and Principles**: At the level of values, if learning is not valued by the organization, this will be demonstrated in actions and policies. In these organizations, leaders may say they value employee learning, but don’t model learning, don’t actively encourage it, and don’t reward learning in others. Managers don’t facilitate the growth of the people who report to them and. risk-taking is discouraged and failure is penalized. Short-term outputs are favored over long-term development. And employees are not encouraged to actively seek the knowledge and skills that they need. Rather, responsibility for learning rests solely in the hands of training professionals. The true values of that organization (the invisible guiding hand) put learning low on the agenda. In these organizations, actions speak much louder than the words, “We value learning and employee development.”

**Symbols and Artifacts**: At the level of symbols and artifacts, if the physical layout of offices in an organization, for example, does not allow for communication and planning among different functions, then learning will not occur. The arrangement and use of work spaces sends a message about the beliefs and values of an organization regarding learning. In addition, the use of technology can facilitate cross functional as well as intercompany learning when set up to foster information sharing and collaboration. Do employees see barriers to sharing information or do they see symbols of an environment where learning is encouraged and supported?

**We cannot let this situation continue.** The need for continuous employee learning has never been greater. Organizations of all types are reporting that they are finding it very challenging to find talent that matches their needs. In addition, CEOs are reporting difficulty finding workers who are familiar with the latest technologies. Executives complain about a shortage of
talent in the areas of: intellectual curiosity; holistic thinking; cultural competence; empathy; and adaptability.

Millenials, apparently more than previous generations, are demanding opportunities to learn and grow in their jobs, rapidly make a significant contribution, and quickly move up the corporate ladder. And given digital technology, globalization, and a diverse workforce, companies, today, must keep learning and learn fast. Liz Wiseman, author of *Rookie Smarts: Why Learning Beats Knowing in the New Game of Work*, says, “The speed with which we learn will be more critical than the extent of what we know.”

**Need for a Learning Culture**

The solution to this learning crisis is not more training, which is simply throwing good money after bad by just putting a Band-Aid on the problem. At *Learning to be Great*, we believe that the solution lies in shaping a culture that supports continuous learning by everyone. To create and sustain this “learning culture”, we have identified five elements that are key to learning in organizations. The name for each element starts with the letter “A” so we call them the **5As Framework**. Implementation of this Framework ensures impact from learning interventions, formal or informal, instructor-centered or learner-centered.

The elements are:

1. **Alignment** of learning interventions with individual, team, and organizational goals
2. **Anticipation** of learning and success from participation in the intervention
3. forming an **Alliance** between learner and supervisor/boss for the purpose of learning
4. **Application** of learning to achieving business goals
5. being **Accountable** for business results.
Let’s go into more detail about each element.

1. Alignment

Employees are motivated to learn when they understand how that learning will help them be more effective in the organization. In other words, learning activities must have a visible link in the chain of value that connects to significant performance outcomes. Employees might find it fun to use new technology and might even appreciate the distraction from their normal work, but unless the learning has an obvious relationship to business improvement, employees will not value the learning and the initiative will fail. It must be clear to learners that the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs they are being asked to internalize will contribute to their effectiveness in achieving intended outcomes for which they and the organization are measured. With alignment comes a higher level of motivation, greater commitment to results, and a better understanding of what must be done to achieve success.

2. Anticipation

We know that expectations are a major factor in learning. The research on expectations is clear about this: people who expect to increase their knowledge and skills learn more than people who do not have this expectation. Therefore, if you want to maximize learning and business results, you should ensure that learners are anticipating what they will learn from the learning intervention why they will learn it, and how they will apply that learning. They should have high but reasonable expectations for how they will apply the learning to achieving business results. Their managers should also have high but reasonable expectations for performance and communicate these to employees. People that have a clear sense of the benefits and look forward to the experience are more likely to increase their knowledge, skills, and abilities and take full advantage from the outset of what the program offers.
3. Alliance

We also know that an employee’s manager is a critical partner in the learning process. Managers are in a position to connect employees to learning opportunities, support participation in learning activities, create opportunities to apply learning, and evaluate the impact of learning. Employees are much more likely to assimilate new knowledge, skills and attitudes, if they believe that the people to whom they report, care about and support that learning. Executives, also, play a critical role in motivating employees to learn by communicating that the learning is deeply valued, actively supported and rewarded by the organization and that leaders have high expectations for success.

For example, we have observed in our work that managers who learn the most from leadership development programs and do the most with what they have learned (i.e., produce business results) are the same managers who report that they met with their supervisors before and after the learning event to discuss goals and results. These are the managers who feel supported, believe that their participation in the learning event is important to the organization, and know that what they do afterwards to improve performance will be recognized and rewarded.

4. Application

We know that for people to retain newly learned knowledge and skills they must apply that learning immediately or have it reinforced in an ongoing learning process. Whether building a team or solving a process problem, application of new knowledge and skills should occur within hours and days of the learning, not within weeks and months, or never, as so often happens. This means that learners must have meaningful opportunities to apply that learning. Managers and learners must plan together to ensure these opportunities occur. The optimal time to plan how the learning will be applied is during the pre-learning conversation. We know from experience that learners who have a clear understanding of how and when their new learning will be applied, gain considerably more from the learning experience than those
who have no expectations about application. The opportunity to use newly acquired learning cannot be left to chance.

5. Accountability

Finally, we know that employees apply learning to achieving business results when they are held accountable. Accountability means answering important questions -

- What happened in the learning process?
- What was learned?
- Did the learning contribute to important business results?
- What other factors either facilitated or got in the way of learning?
- Was it worth the time, effort, and cost?
- Would the business goals have been achieved anyway, even without the learning intervention?
- What needs to happen in the future so that the activity can contribute to important business results?

These are the questions that cause managers and learners to reflect on the learning process. The answers tell learners and their managers what they need to keep doing, what they need to stop doing, and what else they need to do to improve performance.

The process of being accountable also reinforces learning. By asking people questions about what they learned and how they are applying that learning, employees reflect on their experience and its meaning to them. This can renew individual commitment to improve performance that might have been made at the time of the learning activity but waned in the face of work responsibilities and pressures. For example, we have found that asking managers about the impact of a leadership development program they attended is like a jump start for action. Managers frequently remember the changes they had intended to make after the program and then they re-commit once again to making those changes.
ZingTrain is an example of an organization that practices the 5As. Within Zingerman’s, they call it the “Training Compact.” This compact is an agreement between managers and employees requiring managers to explain the purpose of training and how it will help employees be successful, support employees’ involvement in training, help employees apply that training on the job, and provide feedback to each employee regarding performance.

Summary

Training technology and content are not enough to ensure that learning will be applied to achieve business results. The organization needs to manage and support the entire learning process by applying the “5As Framework”. Ask yourself these questions:

- Is there alignment of the learning intervention (formal or informal) with intended business results?
- Do learners anticipate that they will be able to use the learning to make a difference?
- Do learners and their managers have a learning alliance that supports learning, performance improvement, and results?
- Do learners have an opportunity for application of what they learn to achieve business results?
- And are learners and their managers held accountable for learning and business results?

Better yet, take the Learning to be Great™ assessment of your learning culture. This assessment is based on the 5As Framework.

Having the 5As in your culture will not guarantee that employees will learn or that they will apply that learning to achieving business goals, but without the 5As it is unlikely learning interventions will have a significant impact.
If you liked what you read, please consider joining ZingTrain’s e-news list. Besides our monthly e-news, you will also receive invites to our free monthly webinars. And yes, the occasional marketing email.

For further ZingTrain resources on this topic, explore:
- Articles on Training by Maggie Bayless and Ari Weinzweig
- Webinars by various ZingTrain trainers
- 2-day seminar: Bottom Line Training