Performance Vs. Training
How to Know the Difference Between “Can’t Do” and “Won’t Do”

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“I am not sure what is wrong with that employee! He has been to training several times and still continues to have problems!”

When is training the solution to problems in the workplace? Is there another way to resolve your employees’ inability to complete tasks and assignments properly?

I once worked with an individual who was sent multiple times to different “leadership” training courses and workshops. As his tenure with the company grew, he was occasionally promoted to a new position with more responsibility and a higher salary. All along, managers and others around him bemoaned his inability to lead others and to manage projects. He continued his training regimen, but did not demonstrate any new behaviors or apply different methods for performing his job. When you see something like this, you have to ask, “What is wrong with this picture?” This is where it is important to know the difference between knowledge deficiency and execution deficiency.

Training is often recommended to address an issue that lies outside the scope of objectives for knowledge or skills that can be transferred during the training. Just because some do not “perform” to the expected level does not necessarily mean they are in need of training. A simple test to differentiate between a training or performance need is to ask two questions.

“Has the person ever completed this task or work assignment correctly before?” and

“If their life depended upon it, could they correctly perform the task?”

If the answer to either one of these questions is “YES” then you are on to something. You have discovered the difference between “can’t do” and “won’t do.”

If the person CAN perform the task correctly and is simply not doing it, you do NOT have a training problem. If he has done it in the past correctly and no longer remembers how, then he needs a refresher on how to complete the task. This might simply be reviewing the earlier training or providing some job aids.

Training is required to accomplish one of two objectives:

• to inform a learner of something they were unaware of previously
• to pass along information in the form of steps to enable the learner to accurately perform a task
These are learning objectives and performance objectives, respectively. Once this training has been completed, it is up to the individual to perform the tasks and complete the work. This is where performance issues may surface.

The transfer of knowledge has taken place, but for some reason there is a deficiency in the performance of the task. Perhaps the individual does not complete the task correctly or not at all. Think of the many things in life that we all KNOW how to do, but have challenges performing correctly. Some examples are: driving at or under the speed limit in spite of the “flow of traffic,” maintaining healthy eating habits or living within a budget. There are many sources of knowledge and information available, yet we struggle to accomplish these tasks because we lack proper motivation or rewards to enhance the likelihood of our performance.

The same is true of people who do not perform properly in spite of adequate training. There could be systemic problems within the organization that prevent the learner from executing the task properly. Perhaps they do not have the proper tools to complete the task. Or the task may be so time-consuming that it cannot be completed during the allotted timeframe. Worse yet, the culture may discourage task completion through an inadvertent “punishment” or “reward” for non-performance. These issues are typically uncovered when discussions arise as to what is causing goals and expectations to not be met.

So, is it a performance issue or a training issue? A proper assessment is required to determine if the individual really can benefit from training. Once the correct training course is completed, if the knowledge gained is not put to good use, it’s probably a performance issue and repeating the training will likely not fix the problem. Be sure you know which is which.