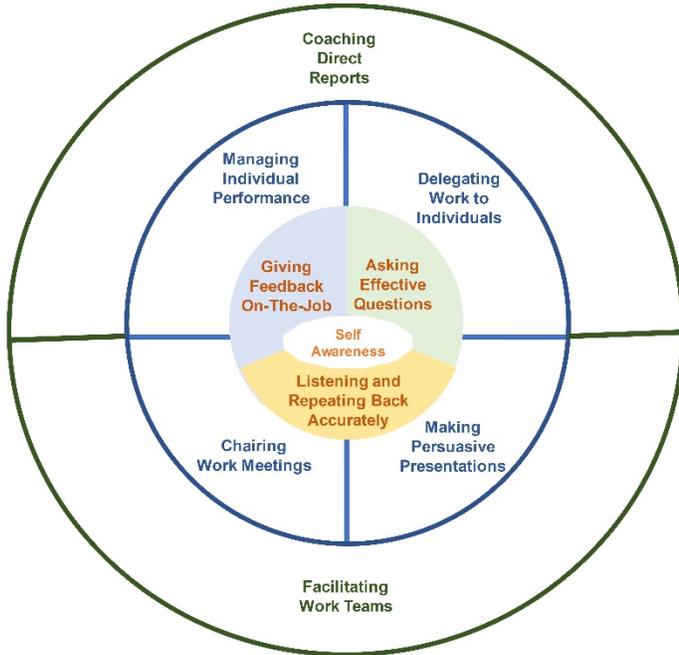




## The 'Hard Why's' Behind Effective Soft Skill Training



As an executive leader, you face an powerful challenge. How can you increase the skills of the people in your organization, large or small, profit or not-for-profit, who leverage the most critical of your resources – the talent of others?.

As an individual who has faced this challenge time and time again, I learned 3 lessons.

1. **Focus on the basics first:** the key skills that have pay-off across the full range of a manager's activities. These skills are things like 'increasing self awareness', 'asking effective questions, and 'giving

feedback'. Only managers who have better than average skill levels on the 'basics' really benefit from investment in more advanced soft skills like coaching and managing performance.

2. **Second – test for individual motivation.** I invested millions of my companies' dollars in technical and soft skill training during my executive career. I followed up on this investment to see if it had real ROI. The test I used was measuring actual behavior change on-the-job.

I discovered that only the smallest portion of the people that we invested in produced this ROI. These people were 'motivated' to improve their skills before we invested in them. The best test of that motivation was 'self initiation' around training. Those people who personally took active steps to get trained changed their behavior change on-the-job. The difference was remarkable, and consistent across technical and soft skill training. When we, the management team, initiated the training – only a few people put the new skills to use on-the job. When individuals initiated the training – by requesting it or finding programs themselves, they took steps to implement the new skills on-the-job.

This result was so convincing that I eventually stopped all forms of "employer-initiated training". Instead, I offered people the opportunity to take technical training or soft skills courses. I led my staff in supporting those individuals who self-initiated this in some way. They were the ones in whom it was worth investing in professional development.

3. **Third – the Skill Extinction Effect is Real.** People don't work in isolation at work. They interact with others in patterned ways. When a person learns a new skill, and starts to apply it at work, this impacts the people with whom they work. Those other people must change



their behavior as well. What motivates them to do so? Often, doing so is either difficult or a 'hassle' for them. Then, they 'resist' the change. They exert social pressure on the person who is implementing the new behavioral skills to go back to their old patterns. I call this the skill extinction effect.

I tried to deal with the skill extinction effect in 2 ways. First, we tagged managers who 'self-initiated' soft skill training at whatever level they did so. We found ways to help them move into new job settings, where they could implement the new skills because they were at day one of developing interaction patterns with the people with whom they worked. By doing so, we got ROI on the skill improvement investment which lasted.

Second, whenever possible, I trained groups on soft skills, not individuals. I provided clear motivation for implementing the new behaviors on-the-job. We positively rewarded those that do (bonuses, performance ratings, expanded assignments) and negatively rewarded the 'slackers'.

### The Best Skill Improvement Self Initiators Often Leave You

The best self initiators at soft skill training were also my biggest turnover risk. Unless we helped them overcome the social pressure of the skill extinction effect, they were the people most likely to move to another job. They simply use this change as the best way to get away from the social pressure to go back to old days of interacting. They now no longer value these old ways of behaving and know they are less effective. They leave to get away from the resistance to change exerted by their old work colleagues. These departures hurt.

### So, What Can You Do as an Organization Leader?

- 1. Measure the effectiveness of all your training programs by measuring behaviour change back on the job.**
- 2. When it comes to soft skill training, invest in the basics rather than in the advanced.**

I got a far higher on-the-job ROI from investing in an "asking effective questions" for my staff than I ever did from investing in leadership training programs.

- 3. Offer opportunities / support to those who 'self-initiate' on skill development.**

When people come to you, asking for training, we help them find effective courses and support them financially. When they come back from such programs, look at ways they can work with 'new people' through project teams assignments or work transfers. By doing so, you help them deal with the inevitable social pressure of the skill extinction effort.