

# **One Manager Asks: “What Kind of Training Make Sense?”**

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As a former large organization executive, I spent a lot of money on training. Much of it was on technical training. By and large, this money was well spent, providing the following three things were true.

1. The person going was motivated. Learning and applying the skill was important to that individual. Using the new skills on-the-job was something that they really wanted to do.
2. The training program was well run. The instructors could coach as well as lecture. They did not just lecture. Straight lecture was the most ineffective of all of technical training programs. The best programs were progressive, starting with base skills and then moving to the more complex ones. The instructors gave the participants a chance to apply what they learned as they learned it. New concept learning was immediately followed by practical problems and cases. Problems and cases got more complex, requiring participants to integrate what they were learning into smart habits they could apply back-on-the-job.
3. The individuals came back from training programs to work assignment that allowed them to apply the new skills immediately. Without this, one of two things happened. The new skills went stale, wasting the training money. Or the individuals, especially the best ones, found a job where they had a chance to apply their new skills. This meant that some other company benefited from our investment.

I learned that timing was everything. I found that we made one mistake consistently. We sent people on technical training at the times scheduled by the suppliers. We did not align this scheduling with the work we asked people to do when they came back to the job. We suffered the consequences. We finally accepted that technical training only really pays off when it is done just-in-time. We started to push both our training suppliers and our managers to make just-in-time technical training the norm for our staff. Project start up and assignment related training was one very practical way of meeting this just-in-time need.

On the soft skills side, I had a much tougher time getting value. I managed large shops of hundreds of people. Interpersonal, supervisory and leadership skills were important in achieving increasing levels of productivity.. Recruiting in the late 1990's was tough and expensive. We needed to grow our own people managers out of a largely technical work force.

By and large, no matter what we tried, we could not convince ourselves that our soft skill training investments paid off. People went on supervisory and interpersonal skill courses. We carefully applied the just-in-time discipline we had learned from technical training. We thoughtfully followed up on training program success, and tied results to performance appraisal results.

When people came back from soft skills training programs, they could talk about the ideas to which they had been exposed. But they did not really change their behavior on-the job. Soft skills training did not make any on-the-job difference for most of the people who went on these programs.

A few dramatically changed their behavior. Our reviews of performance appraisal results showed that they were "stars" before they went on these programs. Often they learned to work more effectively with other people even when we did not invest in soft skill training for them. Sometimes, they almost seemed to become better "people" people by themselves.

Finally, I got a little smarter. I started to talk to the few people (generally the stars) who demonstrated on-the-job behavior change after soft skills training. I wanted to find out why their experiences were different. The following patterns became clear.

1. They were highly motivated. They had a reason to want to change. For some, a particular performance appraisal had really got to them. For others, a significant

conversation with a boss or a friend convinced them that they had to get better at working with people.

2. They did not ignore the need to grow technically. But, they were just convinced that technical training was not enough. They wanted a balance that would allow them to become better all around managers, with both soft people and hard technical skills.
3. They were open to and wanted feedback. They listened when other people told them about how they impacted them. They appreciated the feedback they got from the self descriptive instruments that they used in training programs. They really wanted to hear how people saw and experienced them. They treated it as important data that they needed to know. They never stopped looking for it.
4. When they went on soft skill training programs, they focused on behavior. For example, in a leadership program, they worked hard on the listening and basic communication skills. They wanted to **know how** to do these things, not just **know about** them. They actively participated in the skill practice, role play and feedback parts of these courses. They started visualizing how they would behave differently back on-the-job while skill at the training program.

Based on what I learned from them, I developed a checklist for use in evaluating training investment requests. Managers looking to get approval for spending one or more people on training used it to prepare their requests, or to review requests that came to them for approval. Here it is.

1. Has the person **asked for the training**? How do you know that they are motivated to make **the behavior changes** that will give us value when they are **back-on-the-job**?
2. If this is an investment in technical training, how do you know that the program is **progressive** and involves lots of opportunities to **practice the new skills**?
3. If this is technical training, is it **just-in-time**? Will the person be able to apply the new skills once they are on the job? How long will it be between the time they get back and the first day they are applying these new skills?
4. If this is soft skills training, is the **person really motivated**? **How do you know**? Have you talked with them about why they want to do this? Are you convinced that they are ready to change the way they interact with others once they get back-on-the-job?
5. If this is soft skills training, does the program have specific **concrete "behavior"** (for example active listening, better decision-making, asking effective questions, ... ..) and **structured feedback components** (for example, self descriptive instruments, role plays that involve giving people feedback on how they did, ... ..) components? Or is it about how people "should" do things? Do the instructors actually spend time helping people figure out how to transfer their new skills back to the job?

This checklist made a difference. We got a better return on our training dollars. We used it when we talked to new training vendors. They had to show us that they understood why we were asking these questions. We simply did a better all around job of managing our training dollars.

## About WCI and WCI Press

WCI Press is the publishing imprint of WCI (**W**orkplace **C**ompetence **I**nternational Limited – [www.wciltld.com](http://www.wciltld.com)). For many years, we worked as organizational improvement consultants. With the change of the century, and the expansion of the Internet, we started to publish some of our professional development material on the Internet. We also started **WCI Press**. Its mission is to publish personal and professional development material on paper and on the web. One of our first Web publications was the material used in our late 1990's workshop on competency based HR management. (See <http://www.wciltld.com/wci%20press/WCIPresstoppage.htm>.)

As our own experience with this form of "soft" publishing grew, we realized that nature of our business had changed for ever. More and more experience and expertise would be available for free on the Internet to dedicated professionals. We are proud to be part of this change. But we also realized that we needed to change our own business model in response.

We are still consultants. We have the ability to help clients based on our experience. But today, we are doers. We get things done, rather than simply provide expertise. We still believe in skill transfer and sunset clauses. But we primarily focus on helping companies achieve their bottom line goals through our consulting assignments.

We have also become publishers with a mission. We are dedicated to helping working professionals become more and more capable in their chosen endeavors. Our publications are, and will be, focused on increasing the skills of working professionals. The **Competency Styles™** workbooks ([www.competencystyles.com](http://www.competencystyles.com)) address one-on-one and teamwork skills. We are currently working on a series of **MeetingStyles™** workbooks. They will move beyond the traditional books on effective meetings, and help working professionals develop concrete skills that will allow them to both participate in meetings more effectively, and to lead meetings more efficiently.

We start from the premise that a motivated adult is capable of self-growth. Our publications are designed to be resources for motivated adult working professionals. But we know that HR professionals, HR trainers, college and university adult educators, mediators, group facilitators, counselors, personal performance coaches and business coaches add a great deal to the growth experience of working professionals. Therefore, we support our workbooks with Facilitator Kits and facilitator materials that allow these personal and professional development professionals to incorporate the workbooks into their training, consulting and coaching activities.

## About Roelf Woldring

Roelf is a former IT senior executive and senior organizational change consultant. In 2003, Roelf founded WCI Press. His graduate work was in psychology of the workplace. Roelf writes on software development, on organizational change, and on personal and professional development.

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