

The 5As of Performance Improvement

By Stephen J. Gill, Ph.D.

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Can we talk? You invest hundreds of thousands of dollars (sometimes millions of dollars) and huge amounts of time and effort in training workshops, sales meetings, online courses, leadership development programs, and team building programs. However, if you are like most managers, you are getting less than 20% return on your investment. I'm sure you're not satisfied with that kind of result. And you see the indicators of this everyday in the people who participated in these programs but aren't doing any better in their work than they were before they participated in the program.

This is because other essential elements of the learning system are not in place. Human beings do not learn in a vacuum. They need to believe that they can learn. They need to care about the knowledge and skills being taught. They need to use what they've learned soon after being exposed to the new material. They need to apply the knowledge and skills to meaningful work. They need feedback. They need to feel recognized for what they have learned. They need to see meaningful results from their actions.

Unfortunately, too often employees find themselves being parachuted into an instructional drop-zone. All of a sudden they are tapped to attend the "program of the month". Without preparation and without a plan for follow-up and follow-through, they are told to go to the latest "Lean Manufacturing", "Seven Habits", "Good to Great", "Customer Loyalty", "One Minute Manager", or other "hot" program. Most "hot" programs offer useful content that would benefit any leader, but they are wasted effort if the other key elements of learning are not in place.

That is why these programs go from "hot" to "cold" so quickly, which causes the program-of-the-month phenomenon in organizations. Employees attend and maybe, in the short term, they enjoy the experience (especially if held at an attractive location) and, in the short term, report that it was beneficial and they liked talking with the other participants. Then, over time, their behavior and, more importantly, organizational performance does not improve. Still looking for change, executives and the HR Department begin to look for the "next big thing".

Companies today can no longer count on these isolated events to make a difference, whether a one-day, skill-building workshop, or a year-long, leadership development institute. Maybe there was a time when companies could offer these events to employees without concern for results. Today, time and resources are too precious. You must make sure that you are maximizing the impact from every activity.

This means that rather than a culture of events, you need a culture that supports ongoing learning in your organization. In a learning culture, the normal behaviors, customs, expectations, and goals are all oriented towards learning and performance improvement. To create and maintain this culture, five qualities (5As) must be present: 1) alignment; 2) anticipation; 3) alliance; 4) application; and 5) accountability.

Alignment

Training and development activities must have a link in the chain of value that connects to significant, bottom-line performance outcomes for the organization. It must be clear to learners that the knowledge, skills, attitudes, or beliefs they are being asked to internalize will contribute to their effectiveness. With alignment comes a higher level of motivation, greater commitment to results, and a better understanding of what learners must do to achieve the intended results.

Anticipation

You want learners to anticipate that they will be successful. The research on expectations is clear: people who expect to increase their knowledge and skills learn more than people who do not have this expectation. Therefore, even before employees participate in a learning event, they should anticipate what they will learn, why they will learn it, and what they will do with that learning afterwards.

Alliance

An employee's supervisor and top level executives are essential partners in the learning process. Employees are much more likely to assimilate new knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs if they believe that the people to whom they are accountable care about and support that learning. Supervisors play an essential role in working with learners to set goals (alignment), to clarify expectations (anticipation), to providing opportunities for utilization (application) of that learning on the job, and to determine impact (accountability). And executives play an essential role in motivating employees to learn by sending the message that the particular learning is valued by the organization.

Application

Use it or lose it. We know that for people to retain newly learned knowledge and skills they must apply that knowledge and those skills very soon after learning. This means that they must be given opportunities to apply that learning which means that supervisors and learners must plan ahead to ensure these opportunities. Whether you are building a team or building a house, application should occur within hours and days of the learning event, not within weeks and months, as so often happens.

Accountability

What happened as a result of the learning process? Did the learning contribute to important business results? Was it worth the time, effort, and cost? Would the business goals have been achieved anyway, even without the learning event? What needs to happen so that the learning can contribute to important business results? These are the questions that cause supervisors and learners to reflect on the learning process. The answers tell them where they are and what they still need to do to improve performance. Without accountability, it's like playing golf in the dark. Players don't know if they hit the ball towards the pin and they don't know if they got it in the hole, and, after awhile, nobody cares.

I'm sure you wish you could just send someone to a workshop or seminar and then that individual would come back ready to make your organization more successful. We all wish it was that simple. But it's not. The kind of learning that contributes to important business impact requires a process and a partnership that goes beyond each event. Pay attention to the "5As of Performance Improvement" and you won't have to worry about your training and development investment any longer.