HOW TO TRAIN PEOPLE WHO DON’T WANT TO BE TRAINED: Overcoming the Resistance

A Research Bulletin by:
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Introduction

Change. It seems like such a harmless word when you look at it on paper. When you speak it, however, you can see fear spread across the faces of the listeners in the room. In essence, when you tell employees or a group of individuals that they need to go to training, the “change” light seems to go on in their heads. Similar to two-year-olds about to throw a temper tantrum, some employees plant their feet and go kicking and screaming into the training session.

Fortunately, you can learn how to train the people who don’t want to be trained (or at least act as if they don’t want training). Before you try to launch into implementing ways to overcome the resistance, however, first you need to get to the root of the problem. The only true way to overcome the resistance is to find out what is causing the resistance in the first place.

Top Reasons Why People Resist Change

One of the many signs of a good leader is when someone is able to meet the resistance to change and training head on and help to transform the resistance into acceptance. It also requires the leader to recognize the signs of resistance (because it might not involve kicking and screaming on everyone’s part). Tantrums can be the slightest clue there is something wrong. Some training resistors can even try to sabotage the training or rebel against the training or the company as a whole.

Here you can find the top ten reasons people resist training in your organization. Later, you can learn techniques and tactics to deal with the resisters, and even try to change their attitude toward the training.

Loss of Control

A tendency people have is that they like to feel autonomous or independent. When some of these employees hear they have to change their way of doing things after attending a training session, they feel they are losing their independence. When people feel a loss of control, they tend to go on the defensive and resist the change that is causing their fear. The goal is to make employees feel as if they still retain control of the situation, because the new way of doing things gives them more control than ever before.

Excessive Uncertainty

Some employees think of change as being equivalent to wearing a blindfold while the trainer leads them off a cliff. Obviously, this sense of training propels people to resist it, or outright reject it. Since training equals change and change equals the unknown, employees who possess excessive uncertainty about training stay clear of it altogether.
These individuals would rather be miserable in a situation they know than trade it in for a situation where the outcome is unknown. In order for these individuals to overcome the resistance, leaders have to find a way to make them feel safe and secure about the training and the changes ahead.

**Surprise, Surprise, Surprise**

Surprising someone might be fun and exciting when presents or throwing a surprise party is involved. When training is sprung on employees, they don’t always greet it with welcoming surprise and embrace the “gift” the organization is providing. When there is no warning of the impending training, employees don’t have time to get used to the idea of it all.

Leaders should avoid springing training on employees at the last minute. Instead, be transparent with employees. Let them know ahead of time that training is on the horizon so employees have time to get used to the idea. In other words, plant the seeds and then stand back and watch them grow.

**Everything Seems Different**

Training suggests that changes are on the horizon. Sometimes, it is the degree of the change that makes people put up their resistance. Humans tend to be creatures of habit, so changes put a kink in automatic routines. This can make people feel uncomfortable.

When things are drastically different, it can distract and confuse employees. Walking around in a state of confusion is not appealing to anyone. Instead, they rebel against the training as to rebel against the diversity they are about to face from the training. Assure employees that the training and changes are not going to change everything, but simply enhance and make better the existing policies and procedures in the company.

**Loss of Face**

Employees, supervisors and managers often take ownership of their work. After all, they are the ones responsible for performing the tasks that make the business run on a daily basis. Training suggests that what they have been doing all of this time is wrong and it’s not working.

In other words, it suggests to employees that they are failing. Instead of admitting defeat and departing from the way they did things in the past, they latch on and hold on tight to the way they have always done things. This situation puts employees on the defensive, so leaders have to find ways to bring down the employees’ wall of defense, so that employees let go of the past and sail into the future.

**Competency Concerns**

Facing training can cause an employee to question their ability to learn something new. The last thing someone wants to feel is stupid - especially in front of their peers and superiors. The feeling of incompetency creates skeptics and cynics about the effectiveness of training.

Skeptics point out all of the reason why the training won’t work or isn’t necessary. The root of the problem, however, is the employee can feel as if their skills are out of date. Rather than train
themselves out of a job, they try to resist the training altogether. Again, it is important here to assure the employee that the development of the new skills is to help them rather than to replace them.

**More Work**

Employees can also see training as more work for them. Not only do they have to work through the training, but the work doesn’t end when the training session is over. After training, employees have to find a way to use the training in their everyday roles and job tasks. Nobody wants to feel as if they now have to do more work for the same amount of money. Instead, illustrate how the changes that are being put in place will save the employee time and effort, so they can actually manage their time better than before.

**Ripple Effects**

Training tends to implement changes that affect one thing after the next. Employees can resist this because they feel as if their entire world is about to change. Fear of the ripple effect can create rebellion in departments and groups that aren’t even responsible for attending the training. It is the job of the company leadership to relay how the changes are positive and to relate the changes to the department or areas of the business that are affected.

**Past Resentments**

Past training experiences can cause future problems. If an employee attended a training that they still harbor resentments over, it can cause them to rebel against any type of training they face in the future. Bad experiences in the past can make it difficult to convince employees that this training is beneficial and different from their previous training experiences. You have to work to show how his training is different from their horror stories in the past - be it with top-notch trainers, cutting-edge technology or superior content.

**Sometimes the Threat is Real**

In some instances training leads to real-life problems and issues. Layoffs and budget cuts are but a few of the side effects companies and its employees experience from the training that propels change in the organization. In these types of situations, or if employees perceive that these are the situations training can cause, employees can resist and fight off the training.

You might not be able to control the side effects of the training. In this case, however, you can still focus on the positive attributes of the training and beneficial changes it is bringing to the organization.

**Top Ways to Overcome the Resistance**

Once you uncover what is causing the resistance to training, then you can work to overcome the resistance. It won’t work all of the time, but it is worth learning methods for overcoming resistance to change the attitudes and perceptions of those employees worth changing.

**Recognize the Resistance**
In some cases, employees are upfront about why they don’t want or think they need to attend the training. In fact, some wait until they have an audience and use the training session as their forum to announce their reason for resistance. Rather than ignore the statements or remarks, it is best practice to recognize the issue.

Attempt to turn their negativity into positivity. If they ask questions or make comments with a negative slant, thank them for their question or comment. This helps to validate their feelings. You can either respond immediately or suggest that it is a topic they can cover on a one-on-one basis with you later and after class.

In a one-on-one conversation, you can often uncover the hidden meaning behind their negativity. It can be that they have a concern over their work-life balance, lack confidence or even being overly confident. Some employees simply require some encouragement and praise to turn them into an advocate for the training.

**Come at Them from Their Point of View**

Especially for those resistors to training that feel the training indicates they are losing control, the best practice is to give them some ownership over the training process. One way to do this is by inviting them to help plan and implement the training.

Of course, the person or people you choose need to possess enough competence in the area to add value to the training. Inviting the person as a trainer or co-facilitator provides them with opportunity to share his or her experience with the audience. Ultimately, this provides the individual with the chance to transfer knowledge to others as a senior employee or expert, while also refreshing his or her own knowledge in a challenging environment.

**Find a Way to make it Meaningful**

Employees come to a crossing point, where they have to make a choice when it comes to training. Employees have to either choose to continue with their current behavior or they have to choose to learn. One way to entice them into choosing the path of learning is to make the training matter enough that they change their attitude toward the training.

Learning often falls on a pain-for-gain scale. If the employee deems the pain they have to suffer for the training to provide a gain (a benefit) worth it to them, then it is something they take initiative to complete. If the employee deems the pain of training unworthy, then they are not willing to “suffer” through the training.
**Change the Corporate Culture**

Companies are small communities. Thus, cultures form in the corporate world that shape behaviors, attitudes and beliefs. In some companies, employees have an entitlement attitude. With this attitude, they believe that they do their job, the company pays them for doing it and they are fine with the way things are.

If this is the case, then a more complex intervention is required. In this case, companies have to focus on changing the corporate culture to morph the attitudes of the employees.

**Make it Fun and Motivational**

Something motivates everyone. When you take the time to get to know your audience members that are attending the training, you are sure to uncover what their motivations are. Relate what you are teaching them to the ways it helps them achieve their personal goals - motivate them to reach their goals through the training. Create simple take-away materials that can make their work and/or personal lives better.

Add a fun twist to the learning activities. When the focus switches from stiff learning and training procedures to activities and games, for instance, it can help to motivate attendees to participate. For example, Generation Y seems to gravitate toward learning elements they can use to develop their skills with a focus on fun and intrinsically motivated learning.

**Consider the Delivery**

Training methods are numerous. This includes the way you choose to deliver the training to the attendees. Weigh the pros and cons for using a specific delivery method for the training - classroom style, PowerPoint presentation, games and activities, online or web-based training, etc.

Resentment can form inside of some employees if they have to take time out of the office and away from their families to travel to a conference for classroom training. Motivation can strike these same employees if the training delivery is online, so they can complete it from their work or home computer, however. You can even choose to offer a couple of different delivery options to employees so that they welcome the training instead of trying to rebel against it.

**Adapt to Different Learning Styles**
People also have different learning styles. What one employee can learn from reading training materials, another employee requires someone to talk to them about the material in order to foster the learning process. When people are in their comfort zone, they are more likely to pay attention, to take away the information they learn and to apply what they learned to their real-life job situations.

In order to accommodate different learning styles, involve the target audience in the design of the training. Glean real-life scenarios from attendees to address during the training. Designing the program for the attendees validates your training, but also permits you to adapt your training to the specific needs of the attendees.

Even during the training, you can adapt the delivery methodology to the different learning styles you can see emerging. Extend the learning styles through to the end of the training and even after the training is over. Discuss a reward or recognition system with managers and supervisors. When employees see rewards or benefits from using their training, resistance and apathy tend to melt away.

**Gain Buy-In**

Buy-in for the training starts at the top of the organization and trickles down. It can be harder to convince the executives and higher ups that training is necessary than it is to get the employees to attend the training. When executives and upper management condones training, it helps to create positivity in the minds of the attendees toward training too.

When upper management talks to employees and other levels of employees in a positive manner about training, it transforms the morale associated with training. Additionally, you can overcome a negative attitude toward training and gain buy-in to the training by involving employees in the training design (which was also part of the earlier discussion). Uncovering information that can motivate employees to voluntarily attend the training can be as simple as asking them some questions.

Some buy-in questions to consider include:

- Which skills do they believe can help them succeed in the new economy?
- Which skills do they believe can help them succeed in the new corporate culture?
- Which skills do they believe can help them succeed in working with new technologies?
- Which skills do they believe can help them succeed in working with the younger generation of employees?
- What motivates them to attend training?

As you have these discussions, follow some tips to make it easier on you and the employees:

- Be respectful
- Acknowledge the history of the employee with the organization and their knowledge
- Find a way to involve them in the implementation of the training (For example, allow them to design and implement specific sessions, where they are able to share their experiences with the newer employees.)
Consider the Big Picture

Rather than try to address one issue at a time that is causing the resistance, it’s helpful to take a step back to look at the big picture. There is likely more than item causing employees to rebel against the training. Resistance factors range from choosing the right trainers and training environment to picking methodologies and delivery options that appeal to and motivate attendees.

Corporate culture and the attitude of managers also play a vital role in the big picture. Managers can take on a lead role in promoting training, rather than just nominating employees for training. Training must be a positive and memorable experience for the employee to motivate them for future training as well.

Timely, Useful & Relevant

Underneath it all, every employee wants training and development. Some employees are not conscious of this need but it is there. When you provide timely, useful and relevant information during training sessions, you attract those interested in training to attend the sessions first.

When trained employees return to work with their “great experience” stories and new knowledge and skills, the word spreads. Peers and co-workers can motivate their fellow employees to attend the training. You also have to come to terms with the fact that some employees are always going to resist no matter what you do.

Reveal Benefits Rather than Features

Rather than list out all of the features of the training, lead with the benefits. Show how attending the training is beneficial to the individual employee and how it can help them with their jobs. This goes back to people having the desire to understand how the training benefits them.

Listing the benefits of training will help to win them over rather than listing out a bunch of boring topics that the training is going to cover.

Some of the benefits you can focus on are:

- Performance improvement
- Better time management
- Delegating tasks to others
- Growing in their career

If they feel that it is just a compulsory training to benefit the company, they are likely to disengage. It comes down to convincing them to have the mindset that:
● "I've got a problem I need to fix, and this training will help me do it."
● "If I do this training, I will get ...".

Uncover Best Practices and Real-World Application

Drop the theory behind training (or at least put less of a focus on it). Instead, operate in best practices mode. Using best practices as a basis for training explains why it is necessary to do something a certain way. You can also approach it from a Structured On-the-Job-Training (SOJT) point of view.

Conduct a job task analysis (JTA) on the jobs of attendees, using the employees themselves as the Subject Matter Experts (SME). Develop the SOJT with classroom and hands-on training that relates to their job. This approach increases buy-in for training because it tends to engage attendees because they see how the training directly relates to their job role.

Once they achieve Job or Task Mastery, they receive a certificate (reward) to include on their resume or as part of their portfolio. Employees take pride in their participation in the training and even display their certificates at work.

Provide Quality Trainers & Content

High quality trainers, training programs, content and management systems tend to turn non-engaged employees into engaged employees. Even if high quality training programs or a Learning Management System (LMS) is not in your reach, then focus on ensuring the trainers AND the content is the best you can find. Superior trainers are the key element to providing one-off training events without a LMS in place.

Coming in at a close second of importance to trainers is the quality of the content. Content should be useful and relevant. It should also provide learning materials and tools to build foundational skills through various types of content, including activities and on-the-job applications. When you invest training budget dollars in excellent trainers and outstanding content, you can engage the majority of training participants.

Management Coaching

Management coaching is similar to a mentoring-rewards program. When you establish a management coaching program, the program starts prior to the training, continues throughout the training, and continues after the training. You can opt to make the program mandatory or optional.
When managers are coaches to employees who are training, it sends a message that the training is important to all levels of the organization. Management involvement provides an optimal chance for the return on investment (ROI) of the training for the organization and the trainee to be positive.

**Change People**

Follow in the thought processes of Jack Rooney, CEO (Retired) of US Cellular. He says, “Change people...or change people." When you provide training and development opportunities to employees, you can give them the rules and set your expectations. They have the choice to take the opportunity to grow or you can show them the door and hire employees that respect, understand and appreciate the opportunity to attend the training.

Not sure Rooney’s strategy can work? The proof is in the numbers. During the first year Rooney was CEO, he fired 90% of his leadership staff. US Cellular went on to lead in the telecom industry for years. Hiring talented people is one thing, but people also have to have a desire to grow, personally and professionally.

**Show the Results**

A final way to overcome the resistance of training is to get right to the point. The point being, in this case, being able to illustrate what the positive results of the training can be. The results should be positive and reveal results to both the company and the employee. The process of training isn’t always a welcomed opportunity, but when you can convince attendees the end result of the training benefits the employees it can be much easier to move them through the process.

**Conclusion**

Numerous words strike fear in the hearts of employees. Change is one of them. Training is another one because it is often synonymous with change. Some employees embrace the training and development opportunity and see the benefits the opportunity can bring. Other employees do not welcome the change.

When you uncover the reasons why employees are resisting the training - the development - the change - then you can set to work on transforming attitudes toward training.
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