

Stop Wasting Training Time! Try the S-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-d Workshop

Ivan Scheier, PhD

Ed. Note: Since this issue of THE JOURNAL highlights a major annual event, The National Conference on Volunteerism, it seems pertinent to include Ivan Scheier's provocative perspective on the future of training programs in our field. While there will always be reasons for convening with our colleagues in a conference format, perhaps our expectations about training specifically deserve new attention.

Three thousand training sessions a year compete for the attention of volunteer coordinators in North America. Total attendance probably exceeds 100,000 and the price tag must run to many millions. Cost in time and effort is awesome (see Appendix for basis of these estimates). Yet I am convinced that 90 to 95% of this learning is lost, somewhere between the end of training and the beginning of organizational change. By "lost," I mean the material is never applied in the workplace, and usually is never even seriously tested out there.

Professional trainers seem to concur in this concern. Dana Gaines Robinson, a "trainer of trainers," notes that training departments need "... increased credibility in the eyes of management; the intrinsic reward that comes from knowing people are really *using* the skills learned in the classroom." For this, she proposes a training for impact model which "... focuses *results achieved* both in terms of on-the-job behavior change, and the organizational impact of the training." Further support for this increased emphasis on follow-up comes from Neil Chalofsky, Vice-President of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). In commenting on ASTD's recently-completed competency study for trainers, Chalofsky observed that in the future "... trainers will be responsible not only for learning, but also for making sure that learning is applied on the job."¹

My main evidence on the appalling wastage of training for volunteer coordinators is my own extensive experience as one of the wasters. Over the past 17

years, I've conducted or facilitated more than 600 workshops on volunteer leadership. Cower, as one might, one is bound to meet many ex-trainees again, in all these years. Sure, some of them are kind enough to confirm that some of the training material worked successfully back in the real world. But the longer silences bothered me for what they must have hidden: polite non-mention of what did *not* work or what was never even tried.

I became so guilt-ridden about this that I designed the past two year's travels to enable systematic on-site monitoring of workshop aftermath for anywhere from a week to three months. Conclusions: The learning loss is at least as great as feared; at the same time, there are some things we can do to minimize the loss. To be sure, judged by the standard of successful applications in a trainee's workplace, our huge investment in volunteer coordinator/director training is 90-95% squandered. What's more, a whole lot of people are aware of this at some level and still persist in frequent workshop-attending or workshop-conducting behavior. Why? Powerful impellers must be at work. Is it reflex? Ritual? Recreation? Or is it simply failure to see any better alternative; that is, 5% efficiency is better than nothing!

I do believe there is an alternative and my two years of experience deliberately monitoring workshop aftermath suggests its outlines. I call it "The Stretched Workshop." Unlike Robinson's "Training for Impact," with its valuable emphasis on need assessment and outcome tracking,² The Stretched Workshop model emphasizes deliberate *interventions* over a period of

Ivan Scheier, PhD is one of the leading authorities in volunteerism who has personally conducted training workshops throughout all of North America. His numerous publications are available through Yellowfire Press in Boulder, Colorado.

time substantially preceding and post-dating the training session per se. The process is essentially a hybrid of training and consulting.

WHY TRAINING IS LOST

There are at least three reasons why training material might never be applied. (These factors are particularly pertinent when trainees take generic kinds of training away from their workplace. The factors are less pertinent, though still somewhat so, when training is tailored to a particular workplace or organization and conducted on-site for a number of the organization's workers.) Here are three main reasons for "lost" training:

1. The Trainee doesn't understand the material, because the level and intent is inappropriate, or because the trainer communicates it poorly or for both these reasons.
2. The Trainee understands the material but it is irrelevant to his or her needs.
3. The material is relevant and clearly understood, but the Trainee requires some on-going support and assistance in successfully applying the material and no such assistance is offered.

Consider here the all-too-typical post-training "re-entry crisis." The trainee returns to her workplace way behind in work and confronted with colleagues and supervisors who were not at the workshop. Hence her enthusiasm tends to be met with stonefaces and stonewalls and encouragement of the wrong kind, such as "Hey, why don't you get started catching up on your work." In any case, her isolation prohibits real help even recalling the training material in detail, and adapting it to her individual workplace and situation. Finally, the sad residue of past disappointment may destroy even the *expectation* that training is to be used in real life. However unconsciously, the expectation is instead that training is more spectacle than applicable. Thus, a good workshop is much like good theater. You appreciate the experience of a great performance of MacBeth and may be

deeply moved by it. But you don't really expect to go home and *do* anything about it.

THE STRETCHED WORKSHOP MODEL

The stretched workshop model can help remedy all three difficulties described above and most directly the third one.

The Pre-Training Phase

Quite comprehensive workshop descriptive material is sent to prospective attendees. This includes an extended outline of methods and concepts to be presented, and a clear statement of workshop purposes and objectives (expected outcomes). Prospective participants are expected to relate this carefully to learning needs assessments for themselves as individuals and/or their organization.

The workshop sponsor welcomes dialogue on this with prospective attendees.

If this dialogue suggests the training will, in fact, fit important learning needs, the prospective participant pledges three things in writing. First, to send to the training a significant set of attendees, composed of people who can form an effective representative team for implementing relevant workshop material. For a workshop on board development, this might include a senior board member, the staff liaison person, the volunteer coordinator, etc.

The second pledge is to engage management firmly in resource and policy support of follow-up implementation. While blank-check, blanket approval cannot ordinarily be expected beforehand, we can nevertheless reasonably expect informed commitment. Note here that we are talking about an implementation period of up to three to six months.

Finally, participants pledge to cooperate with follow-up consultants (described below).

As the composition of attendees becomes clearer, the training sponsor begins to select special training follow-up consultants (probably volunteers). There should be one of these for every three to five sets of participants. All should know the subject area well (e.g., boards), and be able to work compatibly with the chief

trainer. In addition, consultants can be chosen for convenience of geographical access to prospective participants and, if possible, some knowledge of their type of work setting (e.g., health care, criminal justice, etc.).

Consultants are well-briefed by the Chief Trainer on what is going to happen at the training session. Preferably, their input is considered in the design of the training and they have roles as assistant or co-trainers.

The pre-training phase can easily require 2-4 months for a local workshop, and significantly longer for regional or national training sessions.

The Training Session Itself

This is similar to the usual kind of training except that:

1. The consultants are assistant or co-trainers and their role in follow-up is clearly identified.

2. Via simulation exercises or in other ways, the training process attempts to identify and solidify optimum matches between sets of participants and consultants (although these matches might also have been largely made before the training session).

3. Attendees from the same organization should ordinarily work together during training exercises, rather than mixing with people from other organizations.

4. Emphasis is placed on each set of attendees producing, by the end of the workshop, a viable detailed plan for implementing selected training materials in their workplace. This plan should include attention to identifying whose support is necessary "back home" to implement the action plan, and steps for securing that support. The plan should also include at least a few "markers" or milestones for events which are targeted to occur during the first 7-10 days following the workshop. If nothing happens—however small—during the first 7-10 days of an action plan, nothing is likely to happen ever. Such is my strong feeling, in any case.

5. The workshop may take a little longer than the usual one (say 1½ to 2 days) because of these special features, especially the one described just previously.

The Follow-Up Phase

No later than a week or ten days after the workshop, the consultant should begin meeting with each of his or her assigned sets of trainees, plus other people these trainees may have brought into the training implementation phase. This meeting is a first check on how the team is doing with the initial phases of the action plan. Thereafter, the consultant meets regularly with the implementation team and also keeps in touch by phone, to monitor progress, troubleshoot where necessary, help mobilize additional information and other resources as needed, and celebrate wherever possible.

The consultant will often be doing this on a volunteer or low-fee basis since her or his services may be needed for as long as three to six months after the workshop ends. Remember that organizational acceptance of and cooperation with the consultant is part of the pledge made by participants prior to the workshop.

CONCLUSION

I have never been fortunate enough to have *all* elements of a stretched workshop precisely in place. But I *have* seen each of them at least a few times, and where several or more are operative at once, I am convinced that application of workshop material is in fact far more frequent and effective.

To be sure, the stretched workshop will be somewhat more expensive, time-consuming and challenging than the trainings most of us are accustomed to. Nor will such workshops be as readily marketable on the mass scale. I suspect many will choose to stick with the more superficial and less demanding types of training. The Three R's of training at its worst—Reflex, Ritual and Recreation—will not succumb overnight, nor will the curtain fall soon on training as theater.

But the stretched workshop is definitely in the future for those who take training seriously as a vehicle of positive organizational and community change. If

that means fewer workshops with more impact, some of us would consider that a bonus in both respects.

¹The Chalofsy and Robinson quotes are from an article by Dana Gaines Robinson in the February, 1984 issue of **Training** magazine: "Training for Impact (How to Stop Spinning Your Wheels and Get Into The Race)," Lakewood Publications, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

²*ibid.*— and well worth looking at!

APPENDIX

Basis For Estimates On Amount Of Training For Volunteer Coordinators/Directors

The key figure is 3,000 training sessions per year. Surveys of local professional associations of volunteer coordinators in North America were taken in 1983-1984, and were reported in "Local Associations of Volunteer Coordinators: A Profile of American DOVIAS" (1985, Yellowfire Press, Boulder, Colorado). This survey indicated at least 600 such associations in North America, each sponsoring an average of 3 or 4 workshops a year. Thus, we are already at a total of about 2,000 workshops.

Then there are about 400 Volunteer Centers in North America, each of which sponsors at least several workshops per year; further add all the workshops and conferences sponsored by state offices of volunteerism, regional groups, national organizations and consultants, etc., and the total is well over 3,000. Since some workshops and conferences are co-sponsored, say, by a Volunteer Center and a local professional association, we shrink the sum a bit back to 3,000.

Total attendance would exceed 100,000 if each of 3,000 workshops averaged 35 people. My own direct experience suggests this is a reasonable estimate. The average is probably somewhat lower for informal workshops in smaller communities. But larger cities and national conferences can easily draw hundreds, and AVA's National Conference on Volunteerism attendance surpassed 1,000 in 1985.

Another way of estimating total attendance is to hark back to Ann Gowdey's mid-1970's (unpublished) study which projected a total of 100,000 volunteer coordinators in the U.S. and Canada. Total attendance would reach 100,000 if each of these attended only one training session per year, surely a conservative estimate.