

# ■ Putting the “Work” back in Workshop

*How to turn training sessions into true learning experiences*

by Tom Terez

With budgets getting slashed to the bone, so-called nonessential training is being canceled faster than you can say “pass me another stale donut.” And you know what? It’s just as well. Most workplace training is a titanic waste of time for employees and a waste of money for organizations. So are conferences that have training sessions.

I don’t say this lightly. As someone who delivers talks and gives workshops for a living, I should be touting their countless benefits. Indeed, I can tout with the best of them.

But you know and I know that for most people, a day in training is little more than a day away from the job. The same goes for those one- and two-hour learning segments at conferences. The registered participants dutifully attend, they politely listen, they go through the motions of all the session activities and exercises. Then the session ends and people go back to their regular jobs. Business as usual carries on with its overpowering inertia. And a week after that promising workshop with all its wonderful ideas and tools, the only thing anyone can remember is how Pat from accounting broke a tooth on a rock-hard bagel.

Now for the good (sort of) news: Training can lead to real change that makes life easier for everyone, helps the organization achieve its mission, and benefits the bottom line. But getting this big payoff requires a ton of hard work – by the attendee, his or her boss, the attendee’s co-workers, and the workshop leader. If you’re unwilling to do the work, then let the cutters do their thing and slash the training and conference budget altogether. At least they’ll be safeguarding your precious teeth from those petrified bagels.

## THE TRAINING ATTENDEE

There’s a popular activity that workshop leaders use to gain insights into a group. They ask attendees to write one word on a card that describes how they see themselves in the training session. There are three selections: learner, prisoner, and vacationer.

I’ve watched this quick exercise at least 20 times, and I’ve used it a few times myself. Invariably, the numbers are evenly distributed, with a third of the participants identifying with each of the three groups. It’s always alarming: Only one out of three people have any apparent eagerness to learn! The rest are there because they’re forced to or because they want a day away from the task treadmill.

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**Every participant should be asking:  
What am I going to do tomorrow that  
moves these ideas from the training  
notebook to my real world?**

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The challenge for all session participants is to open eyes, ears, and minds wide enough to let at least a little learning shine in. Instead of sitting back and watching the clock as the workshop unfolds, lean forward and actively grab onto new concepts, templates, and tools. Look for ways to put this new stuff to work. Each time you see a real-world way to apply what you’re learning, write it down immediately. By the end of the session, you should have at least five ready-to-implement action ideas, including at least two you can implement entirely on your own.

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Your real work begins after the session. Get busy and carry out all those do-it-yourself actions. Do it right away, too, or the blur of daily tasks will turn those great ideas into a hazy memory.

Also, share the big lessons with as many of your colleagues as possible. If you have a regularly scheduled meeting that comes up within a few days of the workshop, get on the agenda. If you have to wait more than a week, try to set up your own gathering. It doesn't have to be fancy – a simple huddle of co-workers will work just fine. Give people a briefing on the most relevant information, share any useful takeaways, and explain some of your action ideas that call for colleague involvement and co-creation. Leave this conversation with a clear sense of next steps so the new ideas get some traction.

## THE BOSS

For many supervisors and managers, "involvement" in the workshop consists of signing an approval sheet and making sure that so-and-so is "covered" for the day. Afterward, if there's any conversation about the session at all, it typically goes like this: "How was the workshop, Chris?" "Real good." "I'll tell you, you were lucky to be out – we were up to our eyeballs in work." "What did I miss?" Business as usual promptly takes over.

This is the "boss as gatekeeper" model, and it robs the training of any lasting value. The boss should instead be a partner with the employee, showing interest and getting involved before and after the workshop.

On the front end, the manager and employee need to sit down and talk about the upcoming training. Will it be worthwhile in terms of the larger vision and mission, and does it relate to specific operational goals? Is it something that will genuinely interest the employee? How will the employee be able to share the information with colleagues? Can additional people attend? What will be done to ensure that some of the new ideas are implemented?

After the session, the boss and participant should continue their conversation. What were the big discoveries from the workshop? How does this new information connect with the current work-

place situation? How can it be applied to solve old problems and seize new opportunities? What action ideas did the employee take away that he or she can implement right away? Are these activities already under way?

Last but not least, what can be done to share the most relevant workshop information with co-workers and get them involved in acting on the information? If there's an upcoming meeting, set aside a chunk of time for the workshop-goer to brief the group and facilitate a "next steps" discussion. If there's no get-together on the near horizon, schedule one. The sooner, the better.

A constructive exchange before and after the workshop? An emphasis on connecting the workshop material with the workplace situation? I know, it sounds like wishful thinking. But without this kind of dialogue, the workshop becomes just an isolated event that's quickly forgotten.

## CO-WORKERS

The typical post-workshop conversation with colleagues isn't much different than the one with the boss. It usually tosses in a few jabs, as in: "How was the workshop, Chris? Did you have fun playing your little team-building games?" "Tell me about it. I snuck out when they did the Human Knot." "Sounds pretty bad." "It gets worse. Some poor sucker broke a tooth on one of the stale bagels they gave us."

Okay, colleagues, I won't tell you to hold back on your jabs, especially if you've had to work extra hard to fill in for that missing somebody. But don't let your workshop-going friend get off the hook so easily. Ask a few questions beyond the standard fare. Did the person pick up any practical ideas and tools that seem relevant? If so, what are they? How can they be put to work? If the answers are vague, ask for specifics. If there were useful handouts, ask to see them. If they look good, get copies.

Find out how your co-worker plans to use the information. See if there's a way you can apply the ideas and tools as well. Perhaps the colleague has certain action ideas that require employee involvement. Learn more about these, weigh in with your own ideas, and do what you can to move the

ideas beyond the drawing board.

Ideally, this dialogue should occur in a group setting. That’s what makes the post-workshop meeting so important. With more co-workers in a single conversation, people have a chance to learn together. And they can develop a set of meaningful next steps in a truly collective way so that consensus and ownership are built in.

## WORKSHOP LEADERS

I mentioned that I deliver talks and conduct workshops for a living, so the following observation should have a certain gravity: Many workshop leaders are hit-and-run kinds of people. They come in, go through the motions of a canned program, and high-tail it out. Very little thought is given to what occurs before and after the session – and even less action. (Note to my fellow speakers and workshop leaders: I said “many,” not all. Please don’t send me any flaming e-mails.)

The far better approach is to do some essential homework on the front end. Talk with some of the would-be participants, and with their managers. Find out about their world – the latest challenges, the improvement opportunities, the culture, the terminology. This is the best way to shape the session for the particular group.

Also in these conversations, try to gauge the extent to which the boss is interested and engaged in the upcoming session. Ask about co-workers too. If you find that little groundwork has been laid, offer a few suggestions.

Perhaps there’s some worthwhile prep work that attendees can do – a simple assignment that requires them to get input from their colleagues. This is a great way to heighten interest. During the session, participants can work with the information. And in a post-session assignment, they can

report the findings at a staff meeting, using the opportunity to share ideas and get people involved in next steps.

The workshop itself should have a practical bent. There’s a time for philosophical meandering and pie-in-the-sky thinking – every good learning session should have some. But ultimately, every participant should be asking: How can I put these insights to work? How can I use this stuff. What am I going to do tomorrow that moves these ideas from the training notebook to my real world? It’s up to the workshop leader to force these questions.

Even afterward, when the person who facilitated the session might be a thousand miles away, there are ways to maintain momentum. Send an e-mail to participants two weeks after the workshop to check on their progress in implementing some of the session ideas. Invite questions, and take the time to answer. Place calls to key people to find out the latest. Offer suggestions as necessary.

There’s nothing efficient about all of this. It takes extra time to make the most of a training session or conference experience, whether you’re the participant, the boss, the co-worker, or the workshop leader. But these “inefficient” approaches make the difference between a session that’s here today and gone tomorrow – and a learning experience that leads to positive change in the workplace.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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