Solving the Transfer Problem

The Story Behind Crucial Accountability and Crucial Conversations Training

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For thirty years, VitalSmarts researchers and training designers have worked to turn standard training into a tool for changing behaviors that lead to significant, rapid, widespread, and lasting results. In this document we share how a series of research projects led to award-winning training products that have wrestled the "transfer problem" to the ground. Learn how we discovered the right training content, created an effective and efficient training design, and now deliver training that leads to improved results.

Solving the Transfer Problem

Designing and delivering programs that teach people leadership and other interpersonal skills is fraught with challenges. Research conducted three decades ago revealed that nearly every effort was a failure. People generally gave training courses positive reviews and went back to work with a sincere commitment to change their behavior, only to return to their old habits. When Porras and Berg reviewed the entire collection of published and defensible studies in the late 70s, they could find no change in behavior—nothing, zippo, bupkis.

Since training isn't intended to create good reviews, but rather to change people's behavior and lead to improvements in corporate results, these troublesome findings were an indictment on the field. If training failed to create change, it was a waste of time and money.

Much of the recurring disappointment resulted from what is known as the transfer problem. Training participants had trouble transferring valuable ideas and concepts they learned during training to their behavior back at work.

For the past three decades, researchers at VitalSmarts have studied the transfer problem with a lot of energy. The results of our research (our training products) speak for themselves. Not only do Crucial Conversations and Crucial Accountability, yield significant changes in behavior, they also generate enormous improvements in corporate results. The following material shares how we've learned to overcome a challenge that has plagued the training field since the advent of chalk.

In order to make our training courses, Crucial Conversations and Crucial Accountability, effective tools for change, we had to address three issues:

1. Getting the right content
2. Creating effective training
3. Tailoring the delivery

Transfer Problem #1: Getting the Right Content

What Am I Supposed to Do?

Our first study into what it takes to change behavior included a 360º survey on subjects' leadership practices. The idea was that with the 360º survey, consultants could quickly motivate people to change by confronting them with data about how their direct reports, peers, and boss viewed them.

One of the subjects we tested, Rudy, was an engineering manager whose management style was despised by virtually everyone who worked with him. Unfortunately, Rudy genuinely thought he was a good leader. Surely real data would grab his attention and propel him to change. After Rudy's colleagues filled out feedback surveys, he was shipped off to California where he and other leaders were taught about leadership, given their 360º scores, and coached.

During the training, Rudy was a model student. He agreed with everything the trainers shared, spoke up often, and was excited to see that the content validated his leadership style. He was sure that since he believed in the concepts, his 360º scores would be high.

To Rudy's chagrin, his scores weren't high. When the instructors handed Rudy his scores, he discovered that on a seven-point scale, where one was low and seven was high, many people wrote in zeros and negative numbers. The open-ended responses only threw salt on the wounds since they contained insulting language such as "heartless autocrat" and "insensitive nerd." People disliked Rudy as a leader, and he had hard evidence.

When Rudy met with his personal coach he was devastated and confused. Hadn't he agreed with the leadership concepts? Didn't he understand the principles? Where had he gone wrong? At the end of a brutal discussion of his results, Rudy asked the question many ask when told they're not up to par: "But what am I supposed to do?"

The problem with this particular intervention was that Rudy's low scores—suggestions that he was "hard to approach," or "difficult to work with"—didn't explain exactly what he had done to lead people to these negative responses. Rudy had no idea what to do differently because none of the questions focused on actual behaviors.

Rudy's coach tried for several hours to give him hope by sharing homilies and catchy expressions. Rudy returned to work mumbling that he'd try his best to improve.

Not knowing what to do, Rudy didn't improve. He was motivated to change, but felt completely unable to do what was required. Four months later, Rudy quit his leadership position and returned to his area of technical expertise. His direct reports celebrated, but those of us who had selected and "trained" Rudy didn't. Not only had we failed to create change, but we had caused Rudy a great deal of pain along the way.

We committed to never again use data to propel people to change unless we could identify specific behaviors that were at risk. The survey numbers had provided a false sense of scientific rigor to a highly subjective and imprecise process. To rectify this problem, we vowed to research behavior-based problems so we could eventually teach people exactly what they were currently doing that wasn't working along with the specific replacement actions.

How Do We Find the Right Skills?

Our next step was modeled after a study conducted by a fellow doctoral candidate, Al Rush.

In his consulting days, Al had been asked by Admiral Zumwalt (of Navy fame) to produce a leadership training class for recently promoted captains. Al didn't know what to teach captains and even if he did, he figured they wouldn't listen to him anyway. As a lieutenant, he was far too junior to carry any credibility. So, Al invented a method for uncovering high-leverage behaviors that also gave him credibility.

Al studied the top ten rated captains in the Navy. He observed them, interviewed them, and talked to their colleagues. He also studied ten other captains. And this is where Al's genius came into play. He didn't study ten poorly rated captains; rather, he studied captains who were in the B+ category to compare the ten best with the ten who were quite good. This way, he could divine what separated the very best from everyone else.

To validate the study, Al asked the commandant to give him a list of twenty names in alphabetical order of the ten best and the ten "really good" captains—without telling him which were which. He studied the subjects until he was able to identify the top ten. By separating the best from the quite good, he found the skills that made the best different from everyone else.

Al eventually put together a terrific behavioral-based captain's course, and when he shared where the information came from, the captains sat up and took note.

High-Leverage Best Practices

Inspired by Al's work, we headed straight into a large manufacturing facility and repeated the best-practice methodology. Remember, our goal was to identify specific behaviors (not vague conclusions).

Our efforts were successful. Often, within only a few minutes, top performers distinguished themselves by doing things their peers never did.

But there was still more to be added to our model of change. While it was true that the highly skilled and respected people we studied were at the top of their class across a whole host of skills (excelling in everything from keeping meetings on track to giving compelling speeches), we soon discovered that not everything they did had an equal impact on results. Some of their best practices made projects run more smoothly, others helped with morale, still others made horrific meetings pass without incident.

With more research, two skills sets emerged and sat at the top of the heap. They gave top performers a huge advantage over their peers because each provided tremendous leverage over corporate results. Both skill sets could be applied to problems ranging from productivity to costs to creativity. Consequently, we named these high-leverage tools "crucial skills."

Crucial Conversations. First, top performers were highly skilled at getting the best ideas out onto the table. They were masters of dialogue. They could speak and be heard and encourage others to do the same. This skill, for example, is highly useful when working with a group of highly interdependent experts. Each specialist or expert is hired with the sole purpose of bringing a distinct point of view and knowledge to work. However, if these experts can't or won't express their honest and full opinions, their best ideas won't be incorporated and work teams will make poor choices.

Top performers, in contrast, make it safe for themselves and everyone else to speak frankly no matter how risky or unpopular their views. By so doing, they surface the most accurate and complete information, make the best choices, and then act on those choices with unity and conviction. It is this distinct set of skills that sets them apart from their peers and eventually leads to huge improvements in corporate results.

Crucial Accountability. When teams do surface ideas, make decisions, and set goals, it then falls upon the entire group to ensure that people keep their commitments. Unfortunately, not everyone is equally effective at holding others accountable.

So it should be no surprise to learn that top performers possess another high-leverage skill set. They are gifted at holding others accountable. They are able to discuss issues in a way that not only solves problems but also improves their working relationships. These skills provide a second source of enormous leverage because they lie at the very heart of problem solving, accountability, and execution. Master how to hold others accountable and you can apply these best practices to problems with productivity, quality, costs, morale—you name it.

When and Why Am I Supposed to Do It?

The final element of good training content came from our experience at a large manufacturing facility where we taught several dozen supervisors specific behaviors that would improve their ability to hold their direct reports accountable. This time, the proposed training focused on what people should say and do and not merely on fuzzy characterizations.

The training was organized around steps a supervisor should take to address specific problems like tardiness or violations of safety protocol. While this approach finally gave leaders direct skills to practice, we ran into another barrier.

Consider the following sad-but-true example. After we instructed participants on how to deal with tardiness, a valued employee showed up to work an hour late. His supervisor, who had attended the training, proceeded to use the five prescribed steps for confronting tardiness.

The employee, a fifteen-year veteran of the company, had never been late before. His supervisor approached him by first describing the problem. The fellow explained his father had passed away early that morning and he had been dealing with the devastating blow. He had tried to telephone his boss to let him know, but the line was busy.

The supervisor then moved on to step two. He explained why being on time was important by describing the negative consequences the employee's tardiness had caused his coworkers. This step hardly matched the circumstances. Being told his father's death had inconvenienced his coworkers didn't go over well with the employee, who became quite upset. The supervisor also felt foolish for trying to motivate a highly loyal employee who had just faced a personal disaster.

Obviously, the steps he'd been taught didn't fit the circumstances.

Following this painful experience we realized that it's not enough to teach new behaviors—you must also teach when and why each new skill should be implemented.

Propelled by our research, we were prepared with the content to eliminate the transfer problem. We knew people needed to learn specific behaviors, that these behaviors needed to be based on best practices, and that people needed to understand the theory behind each behavior.

Transfer Problem #2: Creating Effective Training

This took us to the second chasm. How do you teach high-leverage best practices in a way that helps participants not only learn the skills, but also incorporate them into their daily work?

Making the Content Stick

We believed that if you want to change behavior you have to influence cognitive, behavioral, and motivational factors or your efforts will be incomplete. People must understand the concepts, know how to turn theory into actual behaviors, and then want to do so. Without all three elelments, training doesn't work. We drew this idea from the best theory available—Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory. Here's how Dr. Bandura's model applies to training.

Understanding

Once you surface a best practice and build it into training, participants have to understand it. They have to be able to demonstrate two intellectual competencies. First, they must demonstrate that they understand what they're supposed to do (along with when and why). Second, they must be able to create a script of the interpersonal interaction—to generate the actual words.

After years of designing and delivering training courses, we were confident we knew how to teach both of these competencies. If you use the right blend of video, exercises, and case discussions, people can easily master the concepts of complex human interactions.

Behavior

Now it gets more difficult. Knowing what to do and actually doing it are two different animals. Enacting any interpersonal behavior with proficiency demands disciplined practice.

The Structured Rehearsal. To conquer this challenge we went beyond traditional role plays. We found that this common training tool not only took too much time to set up, it also provided a superficial experience where the new skills were rarely put into play.

Instead, we invented three-person rehearsal groups. One person is presented with a problem requiring the new skill. Another person plays the role of the individual who has caused the problem and who is secretly instructed in how to respond. A third person watches the rehearsal and provides coaching tips. This structured rehearsal provides participants with the necessary details of each problem while keeping them focused on the skills they have learned. When they're used well, structured rehearsals move people from a mere appreciation of the concepts to the ability to enact the behaviors. After only a handful of practices, most participants who were later tested demonstrated a competency for each skill.

Motivation

Knowing how to think about an interaction as well as how to enact the right behaviors deals with ability, but leaves motivation untouched. What if people understand what needs to be done and can do what you've taught, but think, "If I do that, I'll look like an idiot," or, "If I said that my direct-reports would take advantage of me?" When people conclude that a skill will cause problems, they aren't likely to use it.

To solve the motivational side of the behavior-change formula, the skills you teach must pass two tests.

Efficacy Relevancy. First, as people observe new skills they must conclude that with a little work, they could do the same thing. If the skills taught in the training appear too complicated, people will think they can't replicate them and won't try them on the job.

Outcome Relevancy. Second, participants must agree that if they did enact a skill, it would lead to the same positive result demonstrated in the training. For example, if you show a video clip of a problem-solving discussion and the person in question immediately agrees to comply, it might appear contrived or too easy. "My people would never act that way," participants complain. If participants conclude the skill won't yield the positive results you've demonstrated, they probably won't implement it at work.

Expanding Our Theory

To test this three-part theory we created separate tools to examine each of the cognitive, behavioral, and motivational domains. First we gave participants multiple-choice questions that examined their understanding. Could they recognize broad level theories as well as specific scripts that would best suit the circumstances? Next, we required each participant to deal with a contrived situation, videotaped the interaction, and then measured their actions against the training ideal. Could they enact the actual behaviors? Finally, we provided each person with a motivational measure that examined their willingness to implement their new skills. We played a video clip of various skills and asked participants to imagine what would happen to them if they used those same skills. Then, based on what they thought the skills would yield for them, we asked them if they would actually enact the skill at work.

Now here's where we were taken by surprise. We watched a group of thirty leaders who had passed these three tests return to their offices after training. Our test results showed that they knew what to do and how to do it, and they had all said they wanted to use the skills at their first opportunity.

Many of them were immediately confronted by employees who had encountered problems while their bosses were away. As we watched these leaders wade into the problems, we were disappointed to see that most failed to use the skills for which they had just demonstrated mastery. How could this be? What were we missing?

When asked why they hadn't used the skills, the participants explained they hadn't remembered to use the new skills. The people they had worked with for years brought them problems they had faced for years, and so, the leaders called on techniques they had used for years. These recently trained and primed subjects stepped right onto the treadmill of habit when their new skills were put to the test.

To solve this "awareness" problem, we had to find a way to remind or cue people to use their new skills while under fire. This was the missing link.

Cuing

This experience led us to add a fourth element to our model of change: people have to recognize *when* it is time to put their newly acquired skill into action—during an *actual* conversation (not simply during the training). To accomplish this, they need to recognize and respond to "cues" or "entry conditions" as they come up.

We had learned earlier that each skill had to come with a theory that explained when and why the skill should be used—otherwise participants would apply them willy-nilly. Now we had learned that merely stating the theory wasn't enough to cue or remind participants to use the skill in the moment. Old stimuli cue old responses. So we had to learn how to connect old stimuli (a problem emerges at work) to new responses (the newly-learned skills). To do so, participants would need to learn how to watch for the crucial moment just before the skill was required. We learned how to teach participants to catch themselves as they started into an old script and restart with new skills. Additionally, we asked them to set aside time to watch for opportunities to use their new skills.

Armed with a four-part model, we built cues into each high-leverage best practice to ensure participants would pull themselves out of the heat of the moment, remember to use their new skill, and transfer the principles to the current situation. We do so by talking about the entry conditions of each of the skills—this helps participants know what to look for and helps them pull out a new skill rather than simply climb on the treadmill of habit. We also discuss the specific forms the problems take in their company as well as when you can most often expect to

run into those problems. In addition, we encourage people to post reminders in key locations—such as models or posters in meeting rooms where many of the skills are called for.

Transfer Problem #3: Tailoring the Delivery

Finally, we faced the last element of the transfer problem. How do you deliver the training in a way that ensures ultimate engagement and skill transference?

VitalSmarts researchers were among the first to recommend training be facilitated by internal leaders and not just professional change agents, trainers, or HR specialists.

Our preference for leader-led training started with a research project. Although leaders may have less refined training techniques, they do have a greater ability to put teeth into training. They can speak with more authority and are far more likely to follow up with participants (their direct reports) to see if they're actually implementing new skills. They can coach, conduct skill reviews, and build new skills into performance reviews. In short, leaders ensure that new skills become part of the everyday routine. But could they train?

To look at the trade-offs between trainer technique and leader power, we conducted a study that compared professional trainers to leaders. Our results were predictable. Trainers scored higher on training evaluations (people enjoyed the training more), but leaders typically created more change. In one case where a leader had also done a short stint in training, he not only received high training evaluations but also created a great deal of change. This was promising.

We capitalized on the notion that leaders could hone their training skills with a little effort. We created training materials that were not only appreciated by professional trainers for intellectual rigor and complexity, but were also easily implemented by leaders. Our goal was to make everyone who stood in front of a training audience look informed, confident, and skilled in both the content of the training and the ability to train it—no matter their background.

Summary:

As Porras and Berg learned decades ago, it isn't easy to bring about significant, rapid, widespread, and lasting change. It isn't even easy to bring about trivial and short-lived change. In many cases, even courses that received top-notch ratings yielded no perceptible changes in performance. For reasons not fully understood at the time, ideas weren't often transferred from the point of inception to the point of execution.

Content

What led to this overall inability to affect results? First, there was the content problem. Trainers weren't covering the right content.

Study and train actions, not outcomes. For years, most leadership and influence training failed to yield behavior change because most of the counsel was nothing more than a statement of what leaders should achieve, rather than what they should do. For instance, during training of accountability skills, participants were typically instructed, "When starting a problem-solving discussion, make sure you establish a good relationship."

The language is far too vague to provide any help and is also vulnerable to multiple interpretations. With no behavior-based follow-up instruction, this type of advice is woefully inadequate and leads to no change.

Study best practices. VitalSmarts researchers began a long line of best-practice studies to uncover the specific actions that set top-rated leaders apart from the rest. Not only were these skills notable, but they could be taught to others. Better still, teaching these best-practices to others led to improved results.

While some best practices led to improved morale or eliminated petty annoyances, others improved key outcomes like productivity, safety, and quality. So we focused on skills with the highest leverage and created Crucial Conversations and Crucial Accountability—two high-leverage skill sets that can be aimed at a variety of important corporate results.

Training and Delivery

Next, we turned our attention to the problem of what it takes to transmit these high-leverage best practices into behavior change at work. Our research helped us link training activities to what needs to happen to a participant during the training experience.

Use a four-part model. We learned that in addition to the cognitive, behavioral, and motivational forces scholars had studied for years, we needed to add cuing to our model of behavior change. People had to know exactly what to do, be able to enact the behavior, have a desire to enact the behavior, and finally, recognize the need to bring their new skill into play in the moment.

Conclusion

So that's how VitalSmarts got to where it is today. We made it our quest to resolve the transfer problem. By combining high-leverage best practices with cutting-edge training techniques, certified trainers not only give the VitalSmarts courses high ratings, they experience changes in behavior that yield *significant, rapid, widespread*, and *lasting* improvements in corporate results.

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