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Trainees pick up important signals: How discretion helps in leader behavior

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Trainees pick up important signals

How discretion helps in leader behavior

Given the billions of dollars spent by organizations on employee training, it should go without saying that for a return on that investment, employees need the motivation to transfer to the workplace what they have learned. Something else which seems like stating the obvious – but evidently needs constant repetition – is that employees' attitudes and behaviors are often influenced by the "signals" they pick up from their leaders' attitudes and behaviors.

Take the example of military personnel who, like many of their fellow employees in civilian occupations, need foreign language skills and are provided with the training courses to acquire them. What are they supposed to think if, when they are back on a mission, their leader uses the services of an interpreter and does not demonstrate even the most basic knowledge of the foreign language? There is hardly any encouragement for others to feel motivated by the training course or to feel enthusiastic about putting newly acquired learning into practice.

What if a firm has instigated training sessions, telling attendees that the training is important for their career development and the general well-being of the organization and, then, the boss pulls some of them out of training because of a shortage of staff? What sort of signal does that send? Certainly not a supportive one. And clearly not one which says: "This training is essential for our organization and we are grateful for your efforts in learning new skills". Encouraging words, but actions are also needed to signal the importance of training.

Because managers are, generally speaking, influential (and if they are not they should be), they can signal the importance they place on human resource practices such as employee training and development. When leaders show support for training through their actions, not just words, trainees are more likely to perceive their leaders as placing a higher priority on training. Supervisor support is an important predictor of training outcomes.

The signals from their behaviors and attitudes can influence trainee perceptions about the importance of training within the organization and can further affect how they prioritize training within the broader scope of their work activities. Even if training is mandatory, the signals that managers send to their subordinates can influence the extent to which subordinates are vested in the training. For example, if subordinates hear a manager downplaying a particular training initiative, they are less likely to be attentive during the training class.

Personal motives that originate from the individual, not the organization

Aspects of training can be mandated or discretionary. For instance, an organization might not mandate its leaders to provide special recognition to training performance, while a leader showing discretion might opt to do so. Leaders might not be required as part of the

training to support their trainees' efforts to acquire skill-based bonus pay, but a leader might – at his own discretion – provide such support. An organization might not explicitly require all non-training work tasks to be scheduled around training sessions, yet a leader – showing discretion – might decide this was the best way to proceed.

Discretionary behaviors are driven by personal motives and originate from the individual rather than through organizational policies, so they are driven by intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivators. They are more highly valued by organizational members than mandatory behaviors because they do not require organizational resources, such as monitoring or extrinsic rewards.

Importance of informal training policies and practices

In research into the linkages between leaders, trainees and the training undertaken, Dr Annette Towler of Chicago's DePaul University and Drs Aaron Watson and Eric A. Surface of SWA Consulting Inc, Raleigh, North Carolina, studied military personnel within a command in which foreign language is a required job-enhancing skill. In addition to finding that the qualities and behaviors which leaders exhibit do indeed play an important role in how followers interpret those behaviors, they argue that a discretionary nature of the support behaviors that leaders exhibit will be related to trainee perceptions of leaders' true priorities or values.

Leader's behaviors in support of mandated and resourced organizational policy are not expected to provide as strong a signal of that leader's priority for training as are non-mandated, discretionary behaviors supporting training activities. Discretionary behaviors are voluntary, not required by organizational policies, yet are often an integral part of cultural norms within the organization. This means that organizations need to be aware that mandating training activities might not be as important as encouraging leaders to place value on discretionary activities. This seems particularly true for trainees who have low motivation to transfer knowledge.

The study findings suggest that informal training policies and practices, such as not pulling trainees out of class for non-critical work events, are most important in setting a positive climate for training. This supports signaling theory that says employees pay attention to the signals sent to them by their managers regarding the importance of human resource practices, such as training and development. When trainees see their leaders engage in discretionary behaviors, they see these signals as more indicative of true leader priorities because the behaviors are not mandated by the organization.

Against a background of a high-operations tempo, numerous training requirements and limited training time and resources, trainees look toward their leaders' behaviors for signals to prioritize training demands to evaluate the cost benefit of devoting time to the various activities. Employees look to their managers as sources of information regarding what happens within the organization. In this way, managers can act as role models who can

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Keywords:

Training,
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Leader behaviors,
Priority for training

boost trainee priority to train through displaying positive behaviors and attitudes regarding training.

Comment

This review is based on “Signaling the importance of training” by Annette *et al.* (2014). Surface who use signaling theory to explain how leader behaviors are related to trainee perceptions regarding the importance of training to organizational leaders and, in turn, trainee priority to train.

Reference

Towler, A., Watson, A. and Surface, E.A. (2014), “Signaling the importance of training”, *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 29 No. 7, pp. 829-849.

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