

Avoid the Allure of Training Activity

By Jim Kirkpatrick, PhD and Wendy Kayser Kirkpatrick



Much of what learning professionals do does not directly contribute to business or mission value. This happens despite the best of intentions; the training department receives a request for training from the business, and works very hard to fulfill it. Unfortunately, business partners may not always be skilled in assessing the appropriate training and performance needs, and the organization goes down the wrong path.

Training activity can be mistaken for value, and effort for impact. How can you tell if your efforts are merely activity, or mission-focused tactics? The world of science and engineering provides a helpful definition to distinguish between the two.

Manage the Signal-to-Noise Ratio

[Signal-to-noise ratio](#) is a measure that compares the level of a desired signal to the level of background noise. It is defined as the ratio of signal power to the noise power (Wikipedia).

Picture a family huddled around a Victoria radio in 1918. Father is leaning over the radio attempting to fine tune through the static (noise), hoping to hear the words of President Woodrow Wilson about the war in Europe (signal).

Signal-to-noise ratio is sometimes used informally to refer to the ratio of useful information to false or irrelevant data in a conversation or exchange. For example, in online discussion forums and other online communities, off-topic posts and spam are regarded as "noise" that interferes with the "signal" of appropriate discussion.

We need to be knowledgeable about what is truly "signal" and "noise" in our work.



Actions that tend to be "noise"

- Acting on training requests without planning and discussion
- Content-laden training courses
- Trainer-centered Level 1 evaluation questions (i.e. The course materials were well-formatted.)
- Extensive knowledge testing to check recall
- Focus on competencies
- Reports expressing learning value with number of people trained and courses completed

Actions that tend to be "signal"

- Planning training in support of highest level business needs
- Process or skills-based training courses
- Learner-center centered evaluation question (i.e. I will be able to apply what I learned on the job.)
- Skill practice and conversation about on-the-job application
- Focus desired on-the-job behaviors, required drivers to reinforce them, and expected outcomes
- Reports expressing learning and performance value with degree of on the job application and business impact

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If what you are doing is not useful to training participants or credible to your stakeholders, it is most likely noise. There will be times when it is necessary to ask questions about the training program itself and instructor performance. These should be as limited and focused as possible to obtain the required information to ensure program quality. All other efforts should be focused on supporting on-the-job performance that will yield the desired business results.

A Success Story



Jim was the director of training for First Indiana Bank in Indianapolis, Indiana from 1997 to 2005. Early in his tenure, the CEO came to him with the corporate directive to “roll out a Total Quality Management (TQM) program for the bank in the next six months”. Being the faithful employee that he was, Jim set out to find out what TQM was, prepare relevant training materials, and put 1500 line employees through training as fast as possible.

It was a mission doomed from the beginning. In retrospect, Jim discovered that there was no basis for the request other than the fact that the CEO heard that “TQM is a great program” from a conversation with a fellow CEO who lived next door to him. While TQM is a proven methodology to improve productivity, the good intentions of those who tried to practice it failed because of that lack of strategic purpose, and the fact that Jim did not set up an effective reinforcement culture. The entire initiative ended up as no more than expensive noise.

Conversely, several years later, a similar request was made to bring another major initiative to the bank workforce. Before blindly stumbling forward with the design, development, and implementation, Jim (having learned his lesson with TQM) went a different route. He first led the senior team through several meetings to determine what type of initiative would best help to achieve the most urgent strategic needs. The cross-functional initiative, incidentally, was ultimately designed and implemented to increase the number of financial products per customer household.

The final result was measurable success – “signal”! By starting with the end in mind, the initiative, training, reinforcement and evaluation were all targeted toward that end. This is alignment made success possible.



What You Can Do

- Make sure all training professionals are clear on the highest-level organizational directives and goals. Tip: visit your own website and read the “about us” section.
- Query business leaders to find out what most needs to happen on the job to accomplish the highest-level goals.
- Study what types of interventions would best support needed on the job performance.
- Conduct a one-hour staff meeting in the training department to openly and honestly discuss processes and initiatives in terms of signal vs. noise.

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- When training is indicated, focus it on preparing participants to perform skills or tasks on the job.
- Phase evaluation questions in terms of the learner, not the trainer.
- Report data related to on the job application and resulting business impact.

About the Authors

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Jim consults for Fortune 500 companies around the world including Harley-Davidson, Booz Allen Hamilton, L'Oreal, Clarian Health, Ingersoll Rand, Honda, the Royal Air Force, and GE Healthcare.

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Jim and Wendy have written two books: [*Kirkpatrick Then and Now*](#) (2009 Kirkpatrick Publishing) and [*Training On Trial*](#) (2010 AMACOM Books).

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