

An excerpt from

Telling Training's Story
Evaluation Made Simple, Credible, and Effective

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Getting to the Heart of Training Impact

*J*an Westbourne had a lot going for her—she was attractive, energetic, bright, and an MBA from the University of Massachusetts. To top it off, she drove an old 60's Porsche Speedster during the Maine summers, switching to a newer SUV for the long winter. Just two years out of her graduate program, she worked in the thriving American Express Financial Advisors office in Portland. All in all, life should have been pretty good for Jan.

But things were not going well. Jan was ranked at the bottom of the 32 fellow advisors in her office. Here she sat in last place, with low performance metrics and a productivity record that put her in the bottom ranks of advisors nationally with her tenure in the company.

It was not for lack of trying. Like others in the office, Jan made telephone “cold calls,” trying to land initial appointments from the long list of prospects the office head provided. But she struggled. The lengthy list of names in front of her would swim in her vision and seem to grow interminably longer in front of her eyes. She would hear echoing voices even before the call of the rejection she was certain she would get. Sometimes, her confidence would flag so much that

she could make only one or two calls. As soon as she got a particularly nasty negative response, she'd pack up and head home, choking back the hot tears that threatened to overtake her if anyone spoke to her.

Her failure nagged at her. This was not how she saw herself—a dean's list graduate and, in her own estimation, a financial analysis whiz. Her friends in school noted and envied her air of self confidence. If they could see her now they would change their tunes. She was fine in client meetings, and in fact could close a sale almost as well as the best in her office. Her problem was making the calls and screwing up the courage to listen to all the “Thanks, but no thanks” replies that were inevitable. Growing up, Jan had not been a person who was used to hearing, “no.”

With so few appointments, she made virtually no sales. Her company data base sales-closing rate predicted one sale for every ten appointments, a number of appointments that many of her fellow advisors reached in a few days. She was lucky to have ten appointments in two months!

She was on the verge of quitting, and in fact, when her boss asked her to stop by the office for a “chat” she decided the option of quitting would be a moot point, as she was certain she was going to be terminated. Not without reason, either; she reminded herself.

But the visit was something else—an invitation to participate in the new advisor “EmoComp” sessions—training in emotional intelligence for new financial advisors. Surprised and again fighting back tears as they reviewed her miserable performance, she listened to her boss's pitch for the training and decided, why not? She would at least sit in, as it was better than getting beaten up on the phone every day and going home crying. Given that she was an apparent flop at this job, at least she could put the training on her resume.

This was Jan's state of mind at the time, she recalled, as she told me her story. What a difference today, ten months after that fateful visit to the boss's office. Her eyes sparkled as we talked, not now with tears but with the energy of her renewed faith in herself. At the time of our meeting, she had moved up

ten places in her productivity ranking and was pushing hard against top ten overall. Her assets under management (a key performance metric) had swelled dramatically, an enviable record for anyone with her short tenure.

The training had been fantastic. She related how she mastered the techniques taught for mentally reframing “failure” reactions into simply non-personal and unthreatening information. She talked of her practice sessions, the feedback she got from her boss, and of the hours she spent reflecting on her emotions when she encountered similar rejections.

Over the weeks after the training, her appointment rate crept up; first 2 to 3 a week, then 5 to 6, then to her current average of more than 14 per week. In the first week after the training, she spent 16 hours making cold calls, almost 8 times what she had ever done before. Though she did not confirm a single appointment that week, she made it through all 16 hours of calling without breaking down and quitting. Using the techniques from the training that she eventually mastered, she persevered despite rejection. She managed her emotions and overcame her fears, making call after call after call until she scored her target level of “wins,” and left to celebrate her success.

After our meeting, both of us feeling good, and with the sun bouncing off the Casco Bay waves, we rode to lunch in her venerable Porsche.

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This was the story my evaluation efforts got for me about Jan. There was no doubt in her mind that this training had been successful, and there was little doubt in mine as well. I have always believed in the power of training. Despite my many struggles with evaluation methodologies and issues, I left the interaction with Jan absolutely convinced that, in her case, the emotional intelligence training her company provided had paid off, and paid off well.

Later, after getting the corroborating evidence and documentation I needed to verify her story, I reflected on the questions that nag so many in our field of training and development. Does training really make a difference? Can we “prove” impact? How can we make the business case for our investments in learning? What evidence can we collect that training really works?

Can We “Prove” Training Impact?

Jan's story is true, though her name and specific office location are fictitious. This was just one of several such stories my colleagues and I gathered during an evaluation of American Express Financial Advisors landmark training programs in emotional intelligence. Later in the book (Chapter Two) I will explain how collecting and verifying stories such as these fit into the Success Case Method evaluation process. In a moment, we will reflect on Jan's story and consider how it makes the case for training impact. But first it is useful to review the larger issue of training impact and how we have tried, in the past, to measure and evaluate it.

Training is one piece, and a small piece at that, in the larger puzzle of individual and organizational performance. The difficulties training professionals and their clients and critics have always had with measuring training benefits are that so many other factors are involved. A training program for sales representatives might indeed increase sales skills, but how much does it really contribute to increased sales and market share? If we measure sales records before and after training, we might or might not find any differences even if the training were having an effect. Or, we might find an increase in sales even if the training had not been any good. Market conditions, new competition, product characteristics, sales incentives, swings in the economy, and seasonal consumer demands are just a few of the factors besides the training that could easily influence

bottom-line results. Given that so many other factors interact with the performance outcomes that training is aimed at, it becomes nearly impossible to sort out the effect that training did, or did not have.

This fundamental reality—that training is only one of many contributors to the goals that we seek to achieve from training—has been the major stumbling block for training evaluation. It has always been seen as relatively easy to measure the success of training when we look narrowly at whether people enjoyed it or believed it was a valuable experience. But so-called “smile sheets” do little to convince anyone that training is really worthwhile, since the enjoyment of training may have little or nothing to do with its ultimate success. It has also been relatively easy to test for learning outcomes, and say with confidence that people either did, or did not, increase their skill or knowledge as a result of a learning experience. But, did it really get used, and did using it lead to any worthwhile outcomes, and did the whole program make any lasting difference to important organizational outcomes such as revenues, competitive advantage, or profits? This has been the perennial impediment.

The training literature is full of evaluation methods and models that have sought to deal with the difficulties in measuring organizational training benefits and attributing these to the training intervention.

Experimental methods with randomized, double-blind treatment and control groups are considered the “gold standard” when it comes to determining the effects of interventions and making causal claims. But these are far too impractical and costly for use in the typical organizational setting.

- Quasi-experimental approaches, such as utility analysis (see Schmidt, et al, 1982, and also Cascio, 1989) or time-series designs (see, for example, Trochim, 1986). These methods are very complex, require sophisticated research and measurement skills, and their statistical manipulations and reports are difficult to comprehend.

- Simpler methods such as the return-on-investment (ROI) methods made popular by Jack Phillips (Phillips, 2003). But even the ROI models and methods can be time consuming and expensive. More importantly, they leave many questions unanswered and involve statistical calculations and extrapolations that raise serious doubts among report audiences.

Overall, when it comes to “proving” that a large training intervention made a worthwhile difference to a company or agency, there are many methodological stumbling blocks and practical realities that can be overwhelming. It is no wonder that most learning and development practitioners have pretty much thrown in the towel and sought to avoid the issue, or sought to deflect attacks by critics with occasional impact and ROI studies. My colleagues and I were no different from thousands of other training professionals; we also struggled with these difficulties, but for us the issues were even more poignant, as we were seeking to be experts in the training evaluation field and also to make a living actually doing evaluations of training.

When we pose the training evaluation question as trying to measure the impact of a large training program for hundreds of employees on the ultimate goals of an entire organization, then the problem indeed seems complex beyond practicality and overwhelmingly difficult. But, what if we step back for a moment, and ask a simpler question? Take the limited instance of whether training made a difference for one single person. What would we want to know, and how and where might we look for answers? These were the questions we asked ourselves when we were in the process of inventing the Success Case Method (SCM), and we surprised even ourselves with the relative ease of solving this problem.

Immediately, by posing the problem as making a case for training impact from one individual trainee, we relieved ourselves of all sorts of statistical significance and extrapolation burdens and obstacles imposed by having to make generalizations to multitudes of trainees. To simplify

things further, the standard for evidence and validity we set for ourselves was derived from the jurisprudence model, not the realm of experimental methods and reductionist analytic techniques such as calculation of means and standards deviations. We wanted evidence that would convince a normal working professional with no research expertise—making the case beyond a reasonable doubt—that training did, or did not, work successfully.

Demonstrating Impact, One Trainee at a Time

Assuming that one single person was the focus of our inquiry, we thought we would really only need to have answers to three pretty simple and fundamental questions to make the case for a training success:

1. What, if anything, did this person learn that was new?
2. How, if at all, did this person use the new learning in some sort of job-specific behavior?
3. Did the usage of the learning help to produce any sort of worthwhile outcome?

If we got positive answers to these questions that we could really believe, would we not have a credible and defensible answer to the impact question? That is, what if we could demonstrate—with convincing evidence—that a person really did learn something new, that they really did use this learning in some important job application, and that this job application led to a worthwhile outcome; would we not have a credible and defensible instance of impact from training? We certainly believed so, and this belief became the foundation for the Success Case Method (Brinkerhoff, 2003). If we could not come up with a credible approach to making the case that training had a true impact for one person, we certainly would make no further progress in crafting a training evaluation method that could work at the program and organization level.

Now of course there may be skeptics who would question the veracity of the one-person impact instance, and no doubt you the reader have

already begun to ask question yourself. To resolve the very reasonable doubts that anyone would have, we must take our answers to the three questions beyond simple “hearsay” and confirm them with evidence. We’ll also have to eliminate some alternative explanations, even if we do find some successful post-training performance improvement. What if, for example, a person did good things after training but didn’t really use anything they learned in the training to do so? To explore these doubts, we will return to the story of Jan, our financial advisor, and consider what additional questions we would have to resolve to accept her story as a true and valid instance of training impact.

Table 1-1 captures these doubts and concerns in a systematic fashion and arranges them by the three basic questions that we used to focus our inquiry. For purposes of further discussing how believable the impact claims can be, the three basic questions have been changed from question form to positive statements, and personalized to Jan’s story.

Table 1-1 Looking for Alternative Explanations

| <i>Basic Impact Claim</i> | <i>Alternative Explanation Questions to Be Resolved</i> |
|--|---|
| 1. Jan learned some new skills for coping with emotional reactions that were hindering her success in making cold calls. | Was emotional interference really the cause of Jan’s inability to make more cold calls? Were the skills truly new or had she already mastered them? Were the skills learned in the training or did she get them from somewhere else? |
| 2. Jan’s usage of her EmoComp skills helped her persevere and make more cold calls. | Did Jan in fact make more cold calls? Did Jan use the learned skills or did she really use some other skills that did not come from her training? Did the use of the skills really make the difference in making more cold calls, or did something else—perhaps a job aid or an incentive—cause her to change her behavior? |

(Continued)

Table 1-1 Looking for Alternative Explanations (Continued)

| <i>Basic Impact Claim</i> | <i>Alternative Explanation Questions to Be Resolved</i> |
|--|--|
| | Could she have made more calls without the training, for instance if her boss had just told her to do it “or else”? |
| 3. Jan’s making more calls led directly to her making more appointments, which in turn led to her increase in sales. | <p>Did Jan’s sales performance really increase?</p> <p>Were the calls necessary to her getting more appointments?</p> <p>Did something else change that helped her get more appointments, such as better prospects on her call lists?</p> <p>Were more appointments necessary to her making more sales? Did she do anything else new that helped her get more sales?</p> |

Any skeptics worth their salt would certainly want answers to these questions before they would be ready to agree that Jan’s story represents a training success. Thus, we knew that if we were going to take her story before senior executives at American Express and stand behind it, we would need to get good answers to these questions. And this is exactly what we do in a Success Case study, as we’ll see in later chapters (especially Chapter Eight on interviewing and Chapter Nine on conclusions to be drawn from SCM studies.)

Using the SCM, we systematically raise and test the answers to each of the questions in Table 1-1. We do this by asking questions directly to Jan, and if we need corroborating evidence we ask other people, such as Jan’s boss or a peer. We also look for evidence that would substantiate claims of impact learning, performance, and outcomes in documents and records. In addition, we test alternative explanations, such as whether a change in office procedures or market conditions may lead to equally significant performance improvement.

If we find that Jan really learned and used something from the training, and we could not find evidence that any alternative explanation from Table 1.1 was valid, we have to conclude that this training probably did work. Jan really was performing more effectively, she took the training, she learned something useful in it, she used it on the job, and the training was a major contributor to her success. If the training were not a success, the only alternative explanation could be that Jan was sorely and deeply deluded, and further, we would have to believe that some sort of conspiracy was in place to alter office records and arrange for co-workers and her boss to give us blatantly false information. Because none of these explanations is plausible, we must come to the conclusion that the training was successful, at least in Jan's case.

But wait. Jan's training was not the only thing that helped her performance improve. Certainly we are not ready to make the claim that her training, and her training alone, was the sole cause for her improved performance, are we? After all, you read in her story how her manager encouraged her to participate in the training, and how she practiced her skills after the training, and how her boss gave her feedback on her efforts. Surely these played a role. Indeed, they did and do, and we must take them into account as well.

Accounting for Other Success Factors

One of the things we have learned in decades conducting evaluation studies and reviewing the research and theoretical literature on learning and performance is this: training alone is never the sole factor in bringing about improved performance, and is often not even the major contributor. Given this, we never try to make an impact claim for training alone. Nor do we try, as some popular evaluation methods and models do, to estimate, isolate, or tease out the difference that training alone might have contributed. There are strong reasons for this, both methodological and strategic, that will be made very clear in the Chapter Three.

We already know without any inquiry at all that training alone was not a sufficient cause. Certainly, there were other factors that played into Jan's success, not the least of which were her boss's support and coaching, and the follow-up materials she could and did access. But, as she so convincingly claimed, this training was a necessary and vital catalyst. It came at just the right time and saved her professional life. She was an asset now to her family, to her office, and to her customers. There is no way, no way at all, that this would have happened but for that training.

We will not try to make a claim about the percentage of impact that was contributed by Jan's training. Again, in Chapter Three we'll explain why there are sound methodological and strategic reasons for not making such estimates. Instead, we just want to be sure, beyond a reasonable doubt, that had Jan not participated in and learned from her training, it is highly unlikely that her improved performance and the benefits that accrued from it would have happened. In other words, we are very content with being able to show that training made a difference, and an important difference, and that the training contributed to valuable outcomes.

In fact, the Success Case Method has the additional goal of pinpointing exactly what additional factors played a role in the success of the training, such as a manager's commitment or a new incentive. Training is always dependent upon the interaction of these other performance system factors in the improvement of performance. If we can find out not only that training made a worthy and necessary contribution, but also what other factors played the biggest role in its success, then we can not only "prove" training, but we can take some very effective actions to improve it. If, for example, we know that success such as Jan's cannot be accomplished without several sequential instances of some feedback from a boss or co-worker, then we can make sure in future iterations of that training that such factors get put in place. We can educate the people who control these factors to manage them so they can get the greatest performance return for their training investments. We take

this argument further in the third chapter where we look closely at a strategy for evaluation and show how the Success Case Method can be leveraged for management and organization development.

From Individual to Program Impact

Obviously, the Success Case Method does not look for only one training success out of a whole program. But the principles we employ in making the case that training worked for a whole program are exactly those that are involved in making the case for impact with one individual. If we could do this well, then next we would tackle the issue of assessing multiple individuals and looking for broader indicators of impact. Certainly a basic corollary is true: if we thoroughly searched and could not find a single real success, then we could make a decisive judgment about the failure of the entire program.

There is another key reason for beginning with a discussion of making the case for the impact on an individual. All training impact begins with the individual. Consider the case of the EmoComp training at American Express, consider further (as was actually the case) that many hundreds of employees were enrolled in this program. Now consider that of these hundreds some went on to use their training in job performance much as Jan did, and some did not. The amount of organizational impact that this training program helps produce is a direct function of the number of individuals who end up using their learning in ways that make a contribution. The more people who are like Jan Westbourne, who find an impediment in their performance that is deriving from some emotional issue, and then take steps to resolve it using a tool from the training, then the more impact this training will have. Clearly, if no one uses his or her learning, then there will be no impact. If 50 use it as well as Jan did, then there is more impact than if only three do.

Organizational impact of training boils down to two rather simple dimensions: the numbers of people who use their learning, and the power of the ways that they use it. One person who uses learning in a very

powerful job application that leads to huge results will produce more impact than ten people who use their learning in pallid and ineffectual ways. Likewise, 50 people using their learning in very powerful ways will produce more impact than one person using that training in an equally powerful way.

Given these rather simple constructs, we can decide how to evaluate the training. If we want to find out how much good a training program did, there are two things we have to know:

- How many individuals used their learning in ways that led to worthwhile outcomes?
- What is the value of the outcomes that these individuals helped achieve through using their learning?

The good news is that this is not an overwhelmingly complex task. When it comes to making a case for training impact in the case of only one person, as we have seen, the burden of proof is not terribly difficult to assemble. There is further good news in that, because of certain predictable distributions of training results, we don't have to track down every single individual who participated in the training and analyze their experience. If this were the case, we would still be evaluating the American Express training even though we started it over seven years ago, as many thousands of employees participated. Given that training has a predictable range of effects and that sampling methods allow convincing generalizations, and also that we have developed some highly effective ways of getting at the right samples, the Success Case Method ranks as not only one of the most convincing means for evaluating impact of training, but one of the most simple and practical.

In the next chapter we will explain in more detail exactly how the Success Case Method works, building the case for training impact (or lack of it), one individual at a time.

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