



# Why bad things can happen to good learning strategies—and what to do

Michael Carman

No matter how good the intentions, few L&D and organisational development (OD) initiatives go to plan, and all face challenges. Here we'll look at four major issues that can threaten to derail L&D/OD initiatives, and what to do about them.

Despite best endeavours and good intentions L&D and OD plans can go awry. Circumstances can change: global credit crunches and economic misfortunes can hit, resulting in a well-designed and executed OD project still missing its mark.

We'll look here at four issues that can threaten to derail an L&D or OD undertaking, and what you can do to deal with them. Note that we're assuming all the necessary rudiments of planning and execution are in place. The issues we'll be examining are those confronting the L&D practitioner that are inherent in the work rather than those that are attributable to lack of organisation.

## Issue 1: Misdiagnosis of the training need

The need for training is highly susceptible to misdiagnosis as a perceived training need can be a many-headed beast. A symptom of one problem can be the cause of another, as management author, Peter Drucker observed ...

Management may see a clash of personalities; the real problem may

well be poor organisation structure. Management may see a problem of manufacturing costs and start a cost-reduction drive; the real problem may well be poor engineering design or poor sales planning. Management may see an organisation problem; the real problem may well be lack of clear objectives.

Imagine if in these examples a team-building L&D effort was undertaken as a means of dealing with personality clashes. Or if a major push on staff motivation was rolled out when the real problem was due to poorly defined or woolly goals. What would happen?

Even a well-delivered and superbly executed training effort will flounder on the basis of an incorrect diagnosis of the underlying problem that the L&D is supposed to address. All the course evaluation forms and smile sheets will show high ratings for the trainer and the delivery of the L&D, but the training will be ineffective as soon as the attendees return to the workplace and the real problem surfaces again.

There are a myriad of examples. Take the case of the sales staff who were only promoting one line of products at the expense of others. It was proposed to provide training in the other product lines, but closer examination laid bare the real problem: commissions were higher for the line of products the sales staff were promoting. Consequently, the training would have been completely ineffective.

**Solution:** Prevention really is better than cure, and there is no substitute for a proper problem scoping or situation appraisal at the front end of any L&D or OD effort. This diagnosis in itself in fact affords a valuable opportunity for collaborative problem solving that has positive team-building side effects. And a problem well defined is a problem half-solved. It's also one that prevents a waste of time and L&D resources.

American training expert, Robert Mager provides a handy diagnostic tool in the book he co-authored with Peter Pipe: (1997, *Analysing Performance Problems*, CEP Press). Their guided decision-making process can be used to evaluate if an individual performance problem is due to a skill deficiency or other factor—such as inadequate resources, desired performance being punishing, or poor performance being rewarded.

If you're already underway with an L&D effort and the ineffectiveness of a misdiagnosed problem is apparent, it makes sense to voice this to the sponsor or L&D decision-maker. They can make a call as to whether the L&D effort should be either halted or continued.

## Issue 2: Treating hygiene factors as motivators

What really motivates staff? In groundbreaking research in the 1950s, psychologist Frederick Herzberg found



that the factors causing staff satisfaction are different from those that cause dissatisfaction. Therefore, addressing the factors that can cause dissatisfaction (which Herzberg termed 'hygiene' factors) does not necessarily lead to satisfaction.

Herzberg identified the motivators that can lead to satisfaction, and these include:

- achievement
- recognition
- the work itself
- responsibility
- promotion
- growth.

On the other hand, hygiene factors (dissatisfaction) include:

- company policy
- supervision
- relationship with the supervisor
- work conditions
- pay
- relationship with peers
- personal life.

Herzberg's analysis contains a vital cause of L&D/OD strategy going off the rails—using a hygiene factor to try to accomplish what only a motivator can do. Trying to address a problem of staff motivation, for example, by deploying an L&D effort for management development or improved relationship skills will not motivate staff. What it will do is remove dissatisfaction associated with management and relationships (which is important and laudable) but it fails at succeeding with the initial problem, that of staff motivation.

The point here is not to disregard hygiene factors or downplay their importance, rather it's to understand the significance of the distinction between hygiene factors and motivators so that L&D efforts can be properly targeted to whichever set of factors is appropriate. In effect, this is similar to the potential misdiagnosis of training needs we saw in Issue 1. This is because there is a mismatch between the learning outcome and the underlying need.

**Solution:** If an L&D effort aimed at boosting motivation isn't producing results, check whether you're addressing hygiene factors instead of the motivators. L&D and OD will boost staff motivation if they enrich jobs such that controls are removed while accountability is maintained; authority is increased; staff are given

complete and natural units of work; and new and more difficult tasks and specialised tasks are introduced. These measures will increase responsibility, achievement and recognition—all key motivators.

And if you're midway through a program that's addressing hygiene factors when it should have been aimed at motivators, you'll have to consult with senior sponsors and stakeholders to determine whether to pull the plug on the current effort and redirect it, or to continue nonetheless (as for Issue 1).

### Issue 3: Woolly objectives

If there's one trap that L&D efforts are susceptible to falling in, it's that of having woolly or fuzzy objectives.

The most elaborate organisational change management architecture cannot support an endeavour whose aim is unclear or poorly

specified. There is simply no substitute for a clear goal that is crisply communicated.

Strategies and change management programs are particularly prone to very general goal statements that can't be observed or verified ('be customer focused', 'engage employees', 'build knowledge'). At best, these are key result areas rather than objectives.

Any L&D or OD effort's goal needs to be capable of being objectively gauged or assessed. Examples of good objectives include 'employee engagement will improve as shown by the increase in bi-monthly pulse survey scores in 2010 compared with the average score in 2009'. Another good example is 'performance will be instilled throughout the organisation as shown by each staff members' ability to describe how their personal objectives support those of the organisation.'

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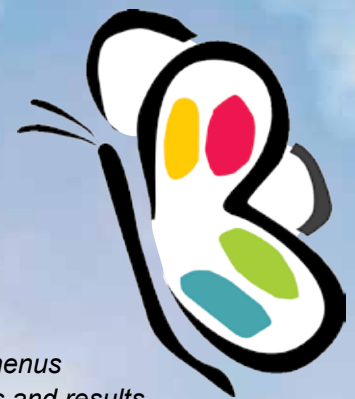
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Note that a goal or objective doesn't have to be quantified but it must be observable or verifiable.

Without clear objectives it isn't possible to tell whether an L&D or OD effort has been successful. Of course, this is precisely why many folk veer away from clear outcomes—failure can't be demonstrated and accountability is thereby avoided. There is safety in ambiguity and cloudiness, notwithstanding that success is sacrificed as well.

(In the same way that addressing hygiene factors does not provide motivation, the absence of failure does not entail success!).

Other reasons for fuzzy objectives include undisciplined thinking and practice, not making the objectives verifiable, or not being accustomed to gathering objective data. Another reason is that for all their value, it's actually demanding work chiselling away to craft clear objectives. However, the payoff in terms of focus and galvanised effort is well worth it.

**Solution:** If an L&D/OD effort is careening along without clear objectives, convene the major players or stakeholders to reinforce the premise that the success of the project is contingent on clearly defining what success looks like.

### Issue 4: The important gets pushed aside by the urgent

Many L&D/OD initiatives are seen as 'nice to haves' that divert people away from 'real work', so are easily put to one side when there is a work crush or crisis. Support for these initiatives can take a hit at such times or, at the very least, suffer a loss of momentum.

The fact that many L&D/OD initiatives do not have clear objectives (see Issue 3) lends credence to claims of irrelevance and makes it harder to support and defend them. This provides yet another impetus to make the effort to sculpt clear goals, and to do so early in the life of a project.

Ideally, of course, the project's supporters would show how the L&D/OD project contributes to the organisation's ability to deal with crises or boosts its capability in managing its workload.

**Solution:** Having high-level stakeholders on board from the get-go is probably the critical success factor for a major change project. When the ground under the project starts to get shaky, a clear public statement of the project's importance by a senior manager can mobilise support and fend off the threat of sidelining or overshadowing. Clear communication of progress to supporters through the course of the L&D effort helps to maintain its visibility and likewise make it easier to call on support when times get tough. ■

**Michael Carman** is a consultant specialising in strategy, performance improvement and change management. [www.mcarmanconsulting.yolasite.com](http://www.mcarmanconsulting.yolasite.com)



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