

Testimony of  
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Before the  
**Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring,  
and the District of Columbia**

Committee on Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate  
May 18, 2000

*“Training Federal Employees to Be Their Best”*

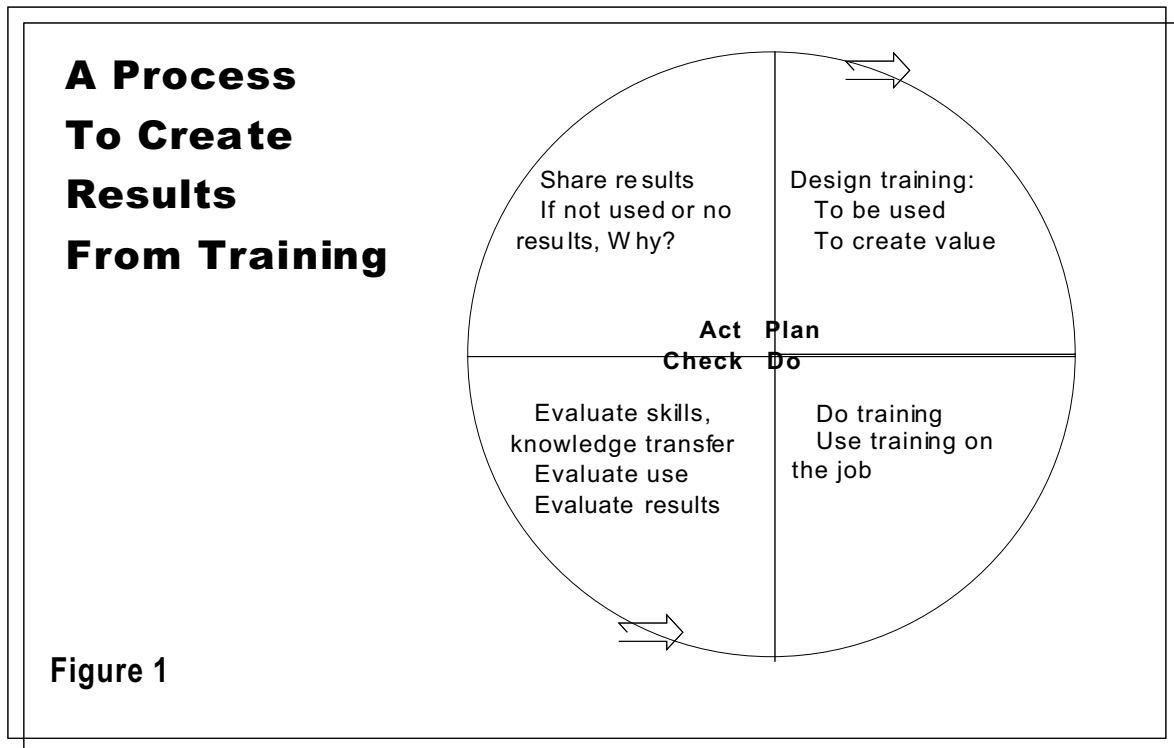


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The experience of the American Society for Quality (ASQ) suggests that, rather than focusing on developing a training delivery system, the federal government ought to focus on adopting a performance improvement system. A performance improvement system that incorporates training efforts and in which training is tightly focused and purposeful. In which the aims are to make sure that training is actually used on the job and which leads to the achievement of beneficial, measurable results for the agencies receiving the training. This is one of the thorniest problems in the area of training to day, and it is shaping the approaches being adopted by world-class organizations in the private sector.

Many of these organizations look to the criteria and values of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award to provide an overall framework for performance excellence that guides their actions—including their approaches to training and development. By approaching their training activities from a similar performance excellence and best practice perspective, the federal agencies that pay for these activities (and the Congress that provides oversight) can best assure that they are getting value from the training efforts.

At the heart of this approach is the familiar Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle, which is both a key element in the Baldrige framework and a driver of improvement activities in the private sector. A model depicting how this performance improvement cycle applies to training-related performance improvement is shown in Figure 1.



## **The Model: A Process to Create Results from Training**

The training design phase is depicted in the upper right quadrant of Figure 1—the “Plan” stage. The needs of the organization are taken into account in the design of training. Two key criteria guide this phase: 1.) The training must be used on the job, and 2.) Once used, the training must create value for the organization. “Value for the organization” might be cost savings, enhanced process efficiency, improved customer/client/constituent satisfaction—anything that the organization determines to be a strategically beneficial result.

This model assumes that the organization has determined that training is the appropriate approach to a particular performance excellence problem or opportunity. However, training is only useful where the cause of performance deficiencies is a lack of skills or knowledge. If individuals can perform particular tasks under any circumstances, then there is not a gap in the knowledge and skills required to meet a particular challenge, and approaches other than training—such as revised management methods or system redesign—need to be considered.

The next phase of the cycle (the “Do” phase) consists of not only conducting the training itself, but also the follow-up to put the training to use on the job. Breakdowns frequently occur at this point, that is, in failure to make the transition from the delivery of training to putting it into use. The training has to be applied quickly because it is well known and documented that learning that is not used decays very quickly. It is not uncommon to encounter estimates that only about one-fifth of the material presented in training courses is used on the job a month later; this corresponds to documented, classic research studies on memory retention showing that the percentage of material remembered drops from 54% after one day from the first learning down to 19% after 28 days from first learning.

Much training is wasted because it is never used. People go through expensive and time-consuming training, then go home and put the manuals on the shelf, never to be used again.

The “Check” phase of the cycle is where measurement comes into play. This is a weak link for many organizations. Many go no further than the most rudimentary tallying of the number of training sessions held or numbers of employees receiving training. Others evaluate the skills attained and knowledge transfer accomplished as a result of the training, but fail to take it further by evaluating whether the training is put to use and whether it leads to desired results. This is the most critical linkage. If an organization—a private-sector firm or a federal agency—possesses a clear strategic direction, it can link individual development with overall direction and measure whether the investment in training and development is moving the organization closer to desired strategic objectives.

Also important at this stage is an evaluation of the actual benefits of the training vs. the actual cost. This analysis cannot be done without an understanding of the ways in which the training led to the desired results.

Finally, in the “Act” phase, results achieved from the training are shared with other appropriate people in the organization and the maximum impact of the training is realized. If the training has not been put to use, or if satisfactory results have not been achieved, an attempt to understand why is made at this point. Knowing why permits adjustments to be made to the training process, which prepares the organization for the next iteration of the cycle.

These activities complete the learning cycle and position the organization to repeat the cycle in an upward spiral of continuous improvement.

### **Environment for Change**

In order for this process model to be applied effectively in the real world, there must be an environment that will make change work for the organization. Best-in-class companies and other organizations—whether for-profit or not-for-profit—invariably possess a social structure that supports the learning and the change dynamics that come about from the learning. Supervisors, change agents, and experts within the organization are actively involved as mentors who promote sharing of the learning. They also teach others about the training systems in place.

Such an environment confers several advantages. It favors the adoption of development plans for individuals in which specific competencies are required to achieve desired performance and results. It helps individuals answer the question, “Why do I need to learn this?” Under these circumstances, learning tends to have more value.

Real learning happens not in the classroom but in the workplace, where competency has to be demonstrated and ultimately conveyed to others. Performance-based development means building systems of learning where planning, exposure to new knowledge, practice, coaching, and ongoing improvement is the norm. When all of these elements come together, the result is a self-supporting and self-reinforcing learning system.

## **Applicability to Training in the Federal Government**

The process described here, and the practices it entails, are entirely compatible with training in the federal government. At each step in the PDCA cycle, the federal agency makes key determinations that govern how the process will be applied in its specific situation.

What are the agency's mission-critical objectives that need to be reinforced through training efforts? What are the specific customer/client/constituent satisfaction issues that need to be addressed through training? Which of these needs, if satisfied, would create the most value for the agency? These are the questions that help the agency prioritize its training efforts. Then, once the value-adding training activities are identified, the agency assesses its skills and knowledge capabilities to see what gaps need to be filled through training, and it designs and carries out targeted training activities. Having progressed through these initial stages of the PDCA cycle, the agency discovers that appropriate and meaningful measures for evaluating use of the training and results of the training will suggest themselves. The agency's managers are in the best position to then see to it that the training is used and the results shared throughout the organization. It is the agency that determines what are the valued results it wants to emphasize through its training efforts.

### **Summary**

To summarize key points related to best practices and training:

1. Genuine needs of the organization form the basis for effective training.
2. Design the training and the organizational support systems to achieve a high rate of use on the job.
3. Design training and organizational support to ensure that beneficial results flow from use of training.
4. Evaluate actual benefits vs. actual cost.
5. Management's responsibility is to design the systems that encourage use of training on the job in order to create value.
6. Use training only where a lack of skills and knowledge is the underlying reason for a performance shortcoming.
7. The criteria and values of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award describe a system that is compatible with training for performance excellence, and the Baldrige winners provide excellent private-sector training and development examples for federal agencies to emulate.

Because so many organizations do not follow through to question whether the training is being used, ASQ has begun to ask this question of the people who come to us for training. We follow up promptly with individuals who take our courses and query them about their application of the materials they learned and acquired. We realize it is the primary responsibility of the employing organization—the organization that authorizes and sends its employees to outside training providers--to make sure the learning is applied.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that as a training provider we are not doing everything we can if we have not structured our courses and training materials in such a way as to encourage and promote their immediate and continuing application in the work setting.

The process described here is proven to work for leading private-sector firms, including many Baldrige Award winners. It is entirely applicable to federal agencies. Furthermore, in pursuing this approach, the federal agencies have the added advantage of being able to learn from the trials and experiences of private-sector organizations.

A transformation is occurring in the private sector, proving that we can, in fact, use the tools and methods of quality improvement to design training that is more effective, less wasteful, and more supportive of the strategic aims of the organization. In other words, training that creates value rather than destroys value.

The American Society for Quality encourages this Subcommittee to use its oversight role to help bring about a similar transformation in the training strategies of the federal agencies.

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***About the American Society for Quality***

*The American Society for Quality (ASQ) advances individual and organizational performance excellence worldwide by providing opportunities for learning, quality improvement, and knowledge exchange. With more than 120,000 members employed in both the private and public sectors, ASQ is the world's largest association of individuals involved in the management and technical aspects of quality improvement. In addition to its extensive publishing, certification, standards, and training activities, ASQ administers the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for the National Institute of Standards and Technology. ASQ has provided its expertise on numerous occasions to advise Congressional committees and governmental commissions on matters related to quality.*