



FOCUSING ON MINDSETS *and* ATTITUDES

- CHARLES JENNINGS

Popular culture can teach the world of work some very good lessons at times. "The Dinosaur Blues" by singer and writer Steven Fromholz is a fine example. The song is an ode to getting older and reflecting on life experiences. There are two particularly relevant lines in the song:

"Change is the very most natural of things and life is mostly attitude and timing."

These two lines should be at the front of the minds of all learning professionals when their organization is planning a soft skills development initiative or struggling with a major change program.

Ensuring that skills development sticks and converts into new behaviors is one of the major challenges in soft skills training. There is plenty of evidence to indicate we are still not very good at that. Many of the approaches we use are suboptimal.

Standard training is not the answer when it comes to developing the traits associated with soft skills, such as integrity, empathy, motivation and other emotional competencies. We can train until the sun goes down and unless we win hearts and minds, behavior simply won't change.

When it comes to behaviors such as diversity and compliance, traditional soft skills training simply has not delivered according to the research evidence.

Let's look at diversity training. It is critical that people behave correctly in the workplace with respect to others who may be different. Apart from it being desirable, there are laws in many countries that

demand this happens. Organizations have a responsibility to support diversity.

However, in March 2012, Peter Bregman reported in a Harvard Business Review blog post that "diversity training doesn't work."

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Bregman cited a meta-study of diversity behaviors in 829 companies over the span of 31 years that showed diversity training had "no positive effects in the average workplace." He pointed out that researchers at the University of Minnesota also concluded that "in firms where training is mandatory or emphasizes the threat of lawsuits, training actually has negative effects on management diversity."

This is a worrying situation. If diversity training has no effect, what about other behaviors that rely heavily on soft skills training?

Jeff Kaplan, a U.S. lawyer and national expert on compliance and ethics, reported a case where the U.S. Justice Department suggested that half-hearted compliance and ethics training had actually enabled criminality in the form of bribery to continue. Half-hearted training does this by creating a defense in the event of detection, so people are more likely to run close to, and over, the line.

Kaplan also points out that this isn't surprising as compliance training is often generic and not tailored for specific needs. It's created and delivered in an utterly wholesale manner. Additionally, the training is often disconnected from risk-causing events. In other words, the training is divorced from the context where risks occur.

These two examples of soft skills intensive behaviors suggest that it may be better to encourage the development of compliance mindsets and diversity attitudes in different ways for greater impact.

This is where Steve Fromholz's "life is mostly attitude and timing" credo is helpful. Attitudes develop and are best changed through observing how others, especially people we respect, behave.

If we want to develop the soft skills in our organization, we must ensure that our senior leaders and high performers are the first to display the behaviors that we want to see. Coaching and support may be required to get this initial cohort aligned and behaving in ways that reflect the skills needed. Once this happens, and if the timing is right, the rest of the organization will follow. [👉](#)

Charles Jennings is a director of the Internet Time Alliance. He is the former chief learning officer for Thomson Reuters, where he was responsible for the development of 55,000 professionals. [Email Charles.](#)