



## How to Implement a Reinforcement-based Approach to Learning and Development that Achieves Permanent, Measurable Improvements in Individual Workplace Performance

### Executive Summary

The ultimate goal of training and development has always been to achieve *permanent, measurable improvements in performance that have a positive impact on business results.*

Executives and HR professionals have pursued this goal for decades. Regrettably, most organizations haven't been able to achieve anything close to this expected return on their investment—especially in the improvement of leadership, sales, service and other interpersonal skills. Even though tens of billions of dollars are invested in learning and development every year, the best efforts of trainers have not been able to consistently produce permanent changes in workplace behavior. This failure has come to be known as the “transfer of training problem.”

Experts say the issue typically isn't with the training and development programs themselves, but with their context—the activities and practices that happen before, during and afterwards. The central problem is *inadequate follow-up reinforcement* of the skills introduced in training. Recent discoveries in neuroscience tell us why this is so important: performance improvement involves the growing of new dendrites to reconnect brain cells into new pathways that enable new skills and behavior patterns. This physical connecting-up process depends on a substantial amount of practical application and reinforcement, which almost never happens in the traditional approach to training and development.

**Train-to-Ingrain** is a uniquely structured performance improvement process that focuses on eight critical areas to address this problem. It gives organizations a realistic, reinforcement-intensive method for transferring classroom learning to permanent improvements in workplace performance.

At the heart of **Train-to-Ingrain** are two imperatives:

1. Integrating assessment and training with enough *follow-up reinforcement* so that newly learned skills and practices are permanently ingrained as improved individual performance
2. Involving direct managers as workplace performance coaches of their subordinate team members throughout this ongoing assessment, training and reinforcement process

The result is a mutually supportive partnership among learners, their direct managers and training staff—referred to as the “Learning Triangle.”

Traditionally, an HRD event or intervention is designed to fix a performance problem:

### PERFORMANCE PROBLEM

- Developmental program

### IMPROVED PERFORMANCE

In the best case, the selection of the developmental program is based on one of the many instructional design models, which attempt to diagnose the performance problem before prescribing a solution. In the worst case, a program is selected based on marketing, politics, consensus or somebody's opinion. In any case, these events or interventions almost never include a program of follow-up reinforcement and so fail to achieve lasting improvements in performance.

Train-to-Ingrain isn't a single program, event or intervention. It's a new contextual framework for conducting such programs. It's an *ongoing process* in which efforts to ingrain new skills and improve an individual's performance become a routine aspect of work:

### PERFORMANCE PROBLEM

- **Assessment**
  - Developmental program
  - Coaching
  - Ongoing development
    - Follow-up feedback and assessment
    - Accountability

### IMPROVED PERFORMANCE

Before training, individual performance levels are benchmarked using multi-source feedback assessment, with the expectation that follow-up measurements will be made several months after training. This focuses learner attention, increases motivation and establishes a mechanism for accountability. Training programs incorporate best practices that contribute to retention and learning transfer. With the support of trainers, direct managers play a crucial role during the follow-up reinforcement phase, supporting continued learning, ongoing feedback, coaching and accountability.

Eight critical areas impact on whether classroom learning transfers to permanent improvements in workplace performance. Ultimately, for maximum return on investment an organization will need to optimize each area:

- **COMMITMENT** – Support follow-up reinforcement
- **COACHING** – Prepare direct managers for their development role
- **FOLLOW-UP** – Integrate reinforcement programs with assessment and training programs
- **ACCOUNTABILITY** – Measure performance improvement and calculate ROI
- **TRAINING FOR TRANSFER** – Incorporate learning strategies that promote application and reinforcement of skills
- **LEARNING NETWORKS** – Coordinate support for the learner

- **FOCUS** – Identify training needs that will have a positive impact on business results
- **CULTURE** – Align the organization’s policies and practices to support performance improvement

It’s neither necessary nor desirable to try to improve all areas at once. To achieve positive results as soon as possible, the best approach is to ***get started quickly*** by doing three things, which can be accomplished in a very short period of time:

- Acquire integrated assessment and training technologies that support ongoing skill reinforcement.
- Involve direct managers in the learning process. Define their staff development responsibilities and hold them accountable.
- Measure performance improvement. Assess skill areas before and after learning to establish developmental goals and accountability.

You can then build on the foundation of these successes with a customized strategy to optimize all eight critical areas.

The above briefly summarizes the **Train-to-Ingrain Guidebook**, written by Dennis E. Coates, Ph.D., which provides rationale, explanation and tools for implementing a customized Train-to-Ingrain system within your organization.

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