

PPS International Limited's Skill-Based Training Methodology

One of our major strengths is that we support training in a way that warrants the skills people learn are actually used on the job. Two factors contribute to the likelihood that such a transfer of learning occurs—the design of the course, and how it's reinforced.

As you can see from our Design Cycle, we at PPS International Limited design programs to promote behavioral change during the training program—change that participants regard as valuable at work. All of our programs are based on real business experiences -- and combine lectures, skill demonstrations, interactive activities, role-plays, and feedback to ensure that new behaviors are learned.

Unlike many programs that try to focus on a participant's understanding and belief, our programs are skill-based. We teach people new skills that help them behave differently, rather than merely helping them understand things differently.

Skill Acquisition

Our educational design involves four steps to skill acquisition. Each skill is first positioned through **involvement** activities and application discussions to help participants recognize that the learning will be relevant. Then, we **tell** how to use the skill that they'll be asked to use, by describing it during a short lecture component—very literally a “how-to.” We then **show** the participants how to use the skill, by demonstrating exactly what they'll be asked to do. We most often show the skills with live demonstrations and activities using specific situations from participants' work life; this ensures greater credibility for the trainers and has a stronger impact on the learner. Then, the participants **practice** the skill during role-plays of real-life situations. We then **discuss** and give constructive feedback on their practice.

Practice, involvement, and feedback produce the greatest return on investment in training. Still, participants require a rationale for “buying in” to the need for improving various interpersonal communication skills. We try our best to make that cognitive connection of value for each skill they learn during each training module.

Participants will not embrace a new skill if they feel that it's “phony” or compromises their identity. We respect each participant's entry level of skill, while at the same time encourage the perspective that even the most effective businessperson can afford to add tools to his or her repertoire.

We structure our workshops' design to help each person integrate the skills into his or her own natural, personal style. Our programs are designed to create a developmental learning environment, not a “remedial” one. As a result, participants feel empowered rather than threatened or compromised, leaving them more receptive to growth and change.

To learn a new skill, you must practice it. Watching others, hearing explanations, and reading instructions are not enough in themselves. That's why swimming teachers get you into the water, and computer classes advertise “hands-on” experience.

For years, this key learning principle was ignored in most training. As a result, much of what was taught never made it out of the classroom.

In all of our courses, the lectures, involvement activities, and demonstrations are all preparatory. The critical learning step is the skill practice that allows a participant to use the behavior being taught. Almost all of these practices are in the form of “real-plays.”

Role-playing provides a means of practicing the complex and subtle skills of communication. A role-play creates an environment that simulates reality to the extent that a skill can be practiced – and, yet, is still safe. The mistakes and clumsiness that may occur will have no negative consequences.

Role-playing is a valuable tool for skill-building, and is used in many of our courses. The main problem that can arise in role-playing, however, is a kind of stage fright; people feel incapable of “acting” out a part. Our seminars use a somewhat less intimidating form of practice, which we call “real-plays.” The practices will all be based on situations that the participants choose, rather than on a pre-created role-play situation. By using this form of practice, participants gain the benefits of role-playing without having to “play a part.” In real-plays, participants will simply be themselves, talking about situations that are real for them, or listening and responding as their partner talks.

Research supports this method of teaching. It has shown that the transfer of training is much more likely if the examples used in the workshop and the content of the role-plays are similar to the work experience of the participants. To help us create the role-plays and gain a better understanding of the situations and language that the group (to be trained) uses, we supply, collect and analyze briefing forms, and conduct telephone interviews.

Structures

We don't consider a training program a success unless the participants are able to use the skills taught during the program and transfer these skills to the job. We know that most people require three or more practices to learn key communication skills such as listening and interactive speaking. Because of this, we teach these skills early in the workshop and reinforce them in every subsequent module. This way, participants reinforce previous learning while mastering new material.

We recognize that practice and reinforcement are an integral component to learning.

- 1) Course Prework: Course prework helps participants get involved in the program beforehand in ways that prompt them to be aware of their on-the-job experiences as they come to the workshop.
- 2) Homework Assignments: The time between each training day offers a valuable opportunity for participants to practice the skills in real-life situations. Assignments are given to participants, creating an opportunity to practice the new skills.
- 3) Action Plans: At the conclusion of each training module each participant is asked to develop his or her action plan, choosing where and when to use the skills. They are

asked to create this plan during class time. The plan supports their use of workshop models and skills -- at work, where it counts.

- 4) Reinforcement Memos: We send a series of reinforcement memos to participants after the in-class portion of the programs. Participants benefit from having materials to read that reinforce the models and skills they've learned in the program. Reinforcement memos also serve as reminders to practice and use the skills taught during the course.
- 5) Reinforcement Sessions: These sessions are offered every three months for up to one full year after the completion of the skills training program. They consist primarily of practices and role-plays, and help participants feel more competent and more natural when using the skills.

We know from pre- and post-workshop observations that because of the listed key elements and our other design features, most participants do indeed acquire new skills during our workshops. Final program evaluations given at the end of our courses list skills or topics taught and allow participants to rate how they have improved their abilities as a result of the program. The following information shows the degree to which 100 managers and supervisors, from companies where we've trained, believed they had increased specific communication skills.

Success Measures

SKILL	YES	NO	MAYBE
Use reflective listening skills.	99%	0%	1%
Set up clear expectations by holding performance agreement discussions.	97%	0%	3%
Conduct effective confrontation meetings.	89%	8%	3%
Use the positive recognition message to acknowledge and reinforce effective behavior.	95%	3%	2%
Use the conflict resolution method.	91%	3%	6%
Use the cooperative problem-solving model with others to arrive at solutions that meet both our needs.	94%	2%	4%
Handle management tasks more effectively by using the skills taught.	96%	1%	3%

Not only do the participants believe they can implement skills on the job (as shown in the information above), but our pre- and post-test scores, both immediately following our courses and at follow-up sessions, show an average improvement of 42% in skill knowledge.