

## Fostering Ability

Developing abilities related to new processes, tools and job roles will vary from employee to employee. Some will fall naturally into the new way of work, while others may struggle.

Managers who use training programs as their primary change management tool might assume that *knowledge* automatically leads to *ability*. There are two common pitfalls that can occur with managers who believe that implementing change is equivalent to conducting training. First, training can be ineffective if the trainees were not *aware* that a change was needed or have no *desire* to support the change. Second, training employees does not always lead to the *ability* to act in a new way or to use new processes or tools. Knowing how to do something and being able to do something are not necessarily the same thing. Recall the potential barriers for ability covered in Chapter 5, including psychological barriers, physical limitations, intellectual capability, availability of resources and time.

Several tactics can be used to develop the abilities of employees in a changing environment.

**Tactic 1** – Day-to-day involvement of supervisors

**Tactic 2** – Access to subject matter experts

**Tactic 3** – Performance monitoring

**Tactic 4** – Hands-on exercises during training

### **Tactic 1 – Day-to-day involvement of supervisors**

Supervisors play an important coaching role with their employees at this phase of change. By coaching employees one-on-one, a supervisor can readily identify the gaps in ability of their associates. Many employees need hands-on demonstrations or need someone to role model the change. Employees also need to know that if they attempt to work in new ways and fail, there will not be adverse consequences for them. This is where the supervisor has a tremendous impact with employees in terms of setting the stage for change. Developing ability takes time and practice. There must be a safe environment to practice new skills and job roles, and someone to provide correction, coaching and support.

This process begins with supervisors making their employees aware that implementing change takes time and practice, and that mistakes or missteps are part of the learning process. Supervisors must then encourage employees to implement the new changes, even if the process does not work perfectly the first time. Supervisors must establish a safe way for employees to seek help and to provide feedback when the change is not happening as expected. By keeping these channels open, managers can determine quickly when the breakdowns are related to ability of the employee or related to something else about the change. For example, a new system may have software problems or a new process may not account for special circumstances that the employee encounters. If the feedback channel is not open, then the employee will appear to be failing when the system is actually at fault.

Supervisors may not understand the level or depth of their role in managing change. Training for supervisors is critical if you expect them to take on this coaching role. As it relates to ability, you must prepare them for the following activities:

- How to provide one-on-one coaching of employees who are implementing new processes, tools and job roles;

supervisors should be able to provide demonstrations and to role model the desired ability

- How to create a safe environment that allows employees to practice and to make mistakes without retribution
- How to create feedback channels to the change management team to identify gaps in processes or tools

### **Tactic 2 – Access to subject matter experts**

Subject matter experts are also useful at this stage of change. Beyond providing knowledge about the change, subject-matter experts or employees experienced with the change can provide direct assistance to other employees. The key to making this work is letting employees know whom to go to for help. Some companies set up a help desk where employees can call with questions. Others provide the names and contact information for mentors or subject matter experts.

What is difficult to ascertain during this phase of the change process is whether the barrier to change is ability or incomplete knowledge about the change. Many employees do not learn until the task is immediately in front of them. The access to experts, mentors and their own supervisor may be filling a knowledge gap more than developing ability. Since each person has to develop the ability on their own, these resources are simply there to assist in that process. For example, if you watch a person learn how to type (develop keyboarding skills), then you can appreciate that you can only do so much to help them. Eventually people just need time to practice, make mistakes and find out what works for them.

### **Tactic 3 – Performance monitoring**

Measurement and performance assessments also play a key role in developing ability. The organization needs to know if

the change is being implemented as designed, and employees need feedback on what they are doing well and what areas need improvement. In the absence of measurement and performance assessment, you may never know if employees are developing the right abilities or if the change is taking hold correctly. Many changes stall when problems occur that do not fit the training provided to employees. In these cases, employees either make up new procedures or revert to what they did before. Measurement and performance assessments help supervisors and project team members understand where the change is succeeding and under what circumstances the change is failing.

#### **Tactic 4 – Hands-on exercises during training**

In addition to providing knowledge to employees, effectively designed training programs should include hands-on activities that allow employees to test their new-found knowledge in different work scenarios. Role plays, simulations and actual hands-on work with new tools and processes allow employees to develop abilities in a controlled environment. Take the example of someone learning how to golf by watching an instructional video compared to playing golf side-by-side with the local golf pro. Actually applying knowledge to different situations that reflect the real work environment can accelerate the process of developing abilities.

#### **Frequently asked questions about ability**

*Is it possible that poor performance (low ability) is actually disguised resistance to the change?*

Work slowdowns and poor work performance could be disguised forms of resistance to the change. Care should be taken to evaluate the situation with each employee on a one-on-one basis. When trained in change management, supervisors will be able to distinguish one from another and implement corrective action.

*What do you do with employees who cannot perform in the new environment?*

Recall the example provided about the call center agent who was a poor performer in terms of cross-selling product. In this case, the supervisor made a mistake by assuming that *knowledge* or *ability* was the problem. In fact, it turned out that *desire* was the barrier point. When employees are not performing in the new environment, the first step is to validate where they are in the ADKAR model and address the first weak area (identified as the barrier point). If that area is *ability*, then consider how much time has been allowed for the employee to develop new skills. What additional support could be provided to help them make the transition? Remember that change is a process. Some employees will need more time than others. If your corrective action process is not successful over time, then this employee may need to move to another position or seek other opportunities outside of the organization.

#### **Summary**

Ability is the demonstrated capability to implement the change at the desired performance level. Ability is not equivalent to knowledge and is not an automatic outcome of training programs. Project teams should implement several channels to assist employees in the process of developing abilities, including:

- Day-to-day involvement of supervisors (so that a coaching relationship is established that creates a safe environment to learn new skills and behaviors)
- Access to subject matter experts (to close knowledge gaps and to have one-on-one demonstrations)
- Performance monitoring (so that demonstrated progress is measured against the desired outcomes for the change)

- Hands-on exercises during training (to provide practice before trying new processes or tools on the job)