

Accountability and the Smiley Face

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When business consultant, Morris R. Schechtman, talks about accountability in his book, *Working Without A Net*, he says, "...because of the drive for comfort in our society, confrontation and conflict are often required to hold people accountable, and many managers would prefer to avoid making subordinates and themselves uncomfortable." This also holds true when it comes to learning in a business setting.

The Success of Learning is Driven by Management

More often than not in a business setting, learners and facilitators will become very uncomfortable, even stressed, when told that management is going to hold them accountable for not only the learning, but also demonstrating that the learning can be applied in the work setting. If you listen closely to the learners concerns about being held accountable for the learning, you will hear their concerns falling into four traditional objection buckets – no time, no need, no hurry, no trust.

The facilitators can become as wary and uncomfortable as the learners. Accountability requires that learning is not only delivered, monitored and supported by a facilitator – in many cases, a manager or supervisor, but also that the impact of the learning be measured. Accountability makes both the learner's and the facilitator's participation visible to any one who is interested in the results that are being achieved.

Under these circumstances, management's commitment to the delivery of the learning and having it stick is put a test. If management moves on to the next issue without giving their needed reinforcement of their expectations for the learning, then the facilitators recognize that once again, "This too shall pass". Given that the facilitators no longer feel the pressure for performing their responsibilities, the learners discomfort level is greatly reduced which deflates their motivation and decreases retention of the learning dramatically.

The Smiley Face

Avoiding accountability because it makes people uncomfortable reminds us of these ubiquitous smiley faces. What exactly does the smiley face represent? Is it a measure of the learner's assessment of the facilitator's performance? Does it represent how much the learner learned and retained from the interaction with the facilitator? I suspect that given the nature of the questions about the learning experience, it is a measure of the facilitator's ability to make the learner more comfortable than the learner's retention of what they retained from the experience – particularly in a classroom setting.

Which is better?

- A. The facilitator receives a smiley face indicating that learners had fun, felt comfortable, and thoroughly enjoyed the training.
- B. The facilitator receives a “thumbs up,” indicating that the training was intense, relevant to their responsibilities and required that the learner demonstrate they have met measurable learning objectives.

When learners have the latter experience, they tend to retain and have a greater potential of using what they learned. Interestingly, the learners who give smiley faces under these circumstances are the learners who put in the extra time required to master the content and distinguish themselves from the others who did whatever was necessary to get through the experience.

Sometimes, greater retention of learning means trading in a significant number of smiley faces to get an increased return on management’s investment in the learning experience.