

The Courageous Training Code: Seven Ways to Strengthen Your Leadership Backbone

By Tim Mooney and Robert O. Brinkerhoff, EdD

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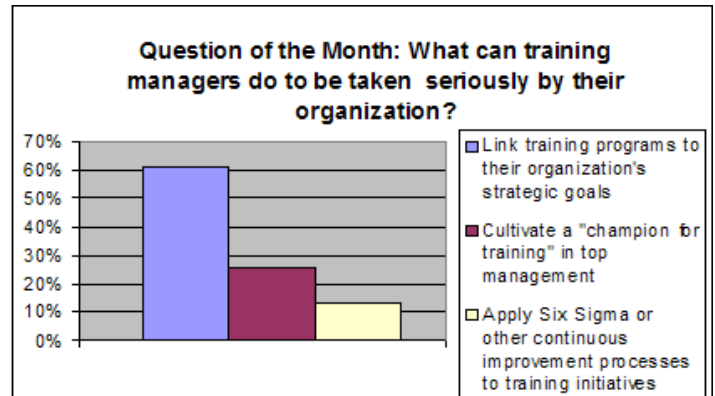
The Courageous Training Code: Seven Ways to Strengthen Your Leadership Backbone

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Courageous Training leaders see themselves as leaders, not administrators, of a training function, though training itself is part of what they do. They also do not see themselves as training vendors, though they do supply training and may bring in training companies to help provide high-quality programs. They do not see themselves as coordinators or brokers of training services, though they do help link people and organizational units with the learning and performance services they need.

Above all, they see themselves as leaders, with responsibilities to the business and the people in it, to ensure effective performance and worthwhile results—not just training results, but business results. Like other leaders in the organization, they are stewards of precious resources, and it is their duty to see that these resources are leveraged into the greatest value possible. Like other leaders in the organization, they have a responsibility to establish and inculcate a vision, to articulate a strategy, to set priorities and goals that reflect the strategy, to ensure effective execution of strategy, and to develop others' skills and talents so that they are maximally successful.

We know from decades of work in the training field that it is easy to fall off the “leadership horse” and succumb to pressures that conspire to devolve the training leadership role into that of a vendor, administrator, or broker of training services. We have seen first-hand how line managers can sometimes treat training staff as if they were simply order takers and delivery people. And we have seen training leaders respond as if the line managers were right.



The Courageous Training Code

The Courageous Training Code is, like the Hippocratic Oath for physicians, a set of principles that is intended to guide conduct and action. Here is the code, summarized as a list:

- Decide to be a pioneer
- Think like a business partner, not a training vendor
- Raise customer expectations
- Embrace resistance, don't avoid it
- Negotiate tactics but don't compromise principles
- Be tenacious, don't get deflected
- Share credit, don't seek it

Decide to Be a Pioneer

At various points in history and on every continent, pioneers have felt a sense of restlessness and dissatisfaction with their lives; they held a belief that they could improve their situation. Maybe they were not happy with their current economic situation; maybe they yearned for a better lifestyle with more freedom; or maybe they just wanted a new challenge. No matter what caused the dissatisfaction, at some point they

made the bold decision to leave the relative safety, security, and routine of the village where they lived and ventured off into the unknown frontier in pursuit of a more rewarding existence. We list “Decide to Be a Pioneer” as the first code because we believe this is the principle that begins the Courageous Training journey. It is a decision to move on and to acknowledge dissatisfaction with the way things are at present.

Think Like a Business Partner, Not a Training Vendor

The training world needs vendors, just as the medical profession needs vendors for the dizzying array of drugs, devices, and tools that are available in the ever-growing health-care industry. The vendor’s role is to represent its product, show the value of the product in solving the serious problems of prospective clients, and help those clients make a wise purchase decision.

But just as we would not want a pharmaceutical sales representative as our personal physician or managing our total health needs, organizations should not want their training leaders to play the role of training vendor.

Training leaders who operate from a vendor mentality will see their responsibility as selling as much training as they can. As we have pointed out, training department metrics often focus on numbers of training hours delivered, number of people trained, or some other dubious measure of productive value. Selling as much training as possible will help one look good against the metrics.

A training leader who adopts a business partner mentality, however, will see requests for service as expressions of dissatisfaction with the way things are or as a need for change. Their first and foremost action will be to learn more about the problem and why it is important to the client. They will see their primary and overarching responsibility as helping the client achieve business goals, all within the context of the larger organization’s purpose and strategy. They will provide training if and when it is needed, but only in a way that will drive the optimal business results (and not just training results).

Raise Customer Expectations

We frequently make presentations to senior executives and line managers about the High Impact Learning approach during which we routinely ask the audience this question: “Based on your experience how much training do you believe actually sticks and gets applied back on the job and leads to business impact?” Without fail the answers we hear from these customers of training are estimates ranging from 5% to 20%.

We have had conversations with some training managers who, although they agree with the statistics, are threatened by this data. They have said they would never consider sharing this information with their senior management, because they don’t want to draw attention to the failings of training for fear that their budgets will be cut—or worse yet, they themselves fired! Other training managers are content with this level of expectation. After all, if this is the typical range of results, then keeping expectations where they are is staying in safe territory.

In contrast, Courageous Training leaders do not want to hide these facts hoping that senior management won’t notice or will be so busy with bigger problems that they will ignore the training’s shortcomings. They look for the chance to stand up and say to senior management, “Are you happy with these results? Because I’m not satisfied, I am embarrassed by the return we are getting for our training investments, and I know we can do much better. The organization deserves better. And with your help I am convinced we can change these results dramatically and double or triple the return we get for our efforts and investments. Are you in?”

Embrace Resistance, Don’t Avoid It

Being a pioneer and implementing the methods and tools of the Four Pillars is leading a change process. As is the case with all valuable organizational change efforts, there will be resistance.

Courageous Training leaders expect some resistance and do not despair. They recognize that the line on the graph of progress is not a straight line that ascends from low to high without dips. The line of progress

will definitely ascend from low to high over time, but it will have peaks, and dips, and then new peaks. Courageous Training leaders are prepared for this roller-coaster ride, recognize that it is part of the natural process, and press forward when they hit these dips.

Negotiate Tactics but

Don't Compromise Principles

If there is one prediction about Courageous Training work that we can make with great certainty it is this: try it, and you will be met with suggestion after suggestion that you make less demanding requests for co-operation and involvement from nontraining elements in the organization. When we first raise the topics of conducting Impact Boosters (where managers learn what they can do to help ensure that training works for their employees), what we often hear is this lament: “You have got to be kidding me. We can hardly get our managers to give up their time to go to any training. Now you want them to go to training about training?”

Because the Impact Booster approach is new and requires some extra work on the part of managers, it almost always gets some resistance. When meeting resistance (or even just anticipating resistance), it is tempting for the change leaders to avoid pushing for managers to participate in an Impact Booster session. The stakeholder may say, “We don't have time for this, because the managers are too busy. Just send the Impact Map out to the workshop participants.”

Courageous Training leaders recognize this request for what it is—a disaster waiting to happen. Although sending out the Impact Map to the participants would enable them to avoid the conflict with the senior stakeholder and give them a warm feeling that they are taking action to keep the process moving, in the long run it will undermine the process and significantly reduce the extent to which the training initiative will lead to business results.

Be Tenacious, Don't Get Deflected

We considered not even including this tenacity principle in the code, as perhaps it is too obvious. But we opted on the side of inclusion, and we did so because including this prescription serves as a forewarning. It says to expect obstacles, to be prepared to divert

from initial plans and make compromises on tactics, and above all, to be ready to be tempted to give up and lower your expectations. Expect the temptation to want to quit, but make a commitment to stay the course. The goal of doubling or tripling business results is indeed possible, and well worth the pursuit.

Share Credit, Don't Seek It

Throughout this book we have made the following key points: Training alone never produces results. Getting training to produce results is a whole-organization responsibility. When training does work, it works because a host of players and factors were aligned to make it work. And when training does not work, these players and factors were not aligned—or the players did not take the necessary actions.

Courageous Training leaders hold these beliefs close to the heart. Each of them recognizes that he or she is the maestro for the symphony of change. As the maestro, the leader plays a critical role in producing a good performance and yielding good results. However, the leader also recognizes that the maestro alone cannot produce the results, so Courageous Training leaders look for ways to publicize how the entire process is working and how the various players (stakeholders) are enabling it to work. They never try to seek the credit for themselves or the training department alone; they always aim to share credit and consistently communicate the message that results are a team effort for which no one individual can take credit.

We believe that most training professionals are not so self-serving that they would seek to take all the credit for success when training works. But there are concepts and tools frequently used by training professionals that belie the “share credit” principle. Several ROI evaluation methodologies that are currently popular among the training profession attempt to parcel out the degree or percentage of a positive outcome that can be attributed to the training alone. Even if it were methodologically possible to do this in any definitive way (which it is not), trying to arrive at a training-alone estimate is just bad strategy.

First, it flies in the face of the reality that business results require a systemic performance improvement

process that involves several factors---not just training. Second, data that attempt to estimate training causal contribution are likely to be viewed by senior or line managers as self-serving, lacking credibility, and naïve. Third, it will inevitably undermine the hard work done to build bridges to the non-training partners. Better to leave it alone.

The principle of sharing credit applies not only to how and why training leaders pursue evaluation and measurement, but also how they comport themselves in all interactions with stakeholders. The attitude from the first interaction to the last, and all in between, should be one of equal partner: a business colleague with some special expertise and talents to lend, for sure, but also a person who knows that no one party or role alone can accomplish the goals that Courageous Training targets.

Summary

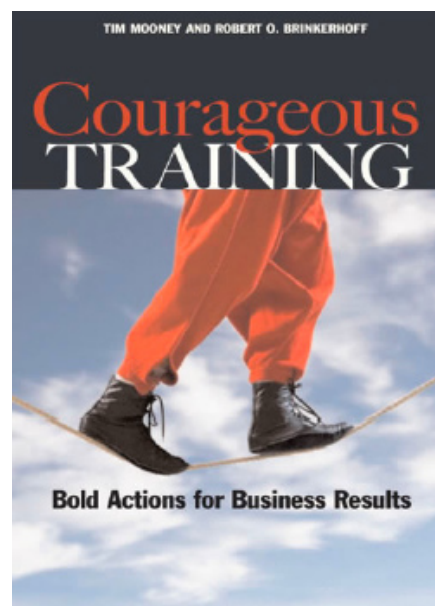
The members of our users group who have successfully implemented the Courageous Training process helped us formulate the Courageous Training Code. They didn't help us formulate the code by telling us the practices; they helped us create the code through the instinctive behaviors and highly successful actions they took in their projects. Watching them work, talking to them about their actions, and analyzing their successes for how they accomplished things helped us codify these high-leverage practices.

For most people who start on the journey, the prescriptions of the Courageous Training Code begin as specific, planned, and purposeful actions they try to take in their implementations. As they gain more experience in the process, training leaders will internalize these practices. The code will eventually become part of the leaders' unconscious repertoire, their philosophy, and how they view the world.

About the Authors

Tim Mooney is a vice president and practice leader at Advantage Performance Group, a global provider of training and performance improvement solutions whose clients include Microsoft, Toyota, Johnson & Johnson, Nestle Purina, American Express and many more.

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