

5-2009

# Helping Managers Help Themselves: The Use and Utility of On-the-Job Interventions to Improve the Impact of Interpersonal Skills Training

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## Recommended Citation

Tews, M. J., & Tracey, J. B. (2009). Helping managers help themselves: The use and utility of on-the-job interventions to improve the impact of interpersonal skills training. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 50(2), 245-258. doi:10.1177/1938965509333520

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## **Abstract**

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## **Keywords**

posttraining interventions, interpersonal skills training, upward feedback

## **Disciplines**

Hospitality Administration and Management | Human Resources Management

## **Comments**

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# Helping Managers Help Themselves

## The Use and Utility of On-the-Job Interventions to Improve the Impact of Interpersonal Skills Training

by MICHAEL J. TEWS and J. BRUCE TRACEY

The purpose of this study was to examine the utility of using two posttraining interventions—self-coaching and upward feedback—to enhance the effectiveness of formal training on interpersonal skills for managers. Data from eighty-seven restaurant manager trainees demonstrated that both interventions were useful extensions to formal classroom training and appear to have substantial utility for helping managers develop and improve their interpersonal skills.

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**P**ositive work relationships are critical for maintaining high levels of job satisfaction, involvement, and commitment. When employees feel

good about their jobs and are motivated to do well, they are able to sustain a high-quality service environment. Thus, promoting effective interpersonal skills is one of the most fundamental priorities for all hospitality organizations.

The importance of effective interpersonal relationships is exemplified by research on the service-profit chain—an integrative strategic framework that describes how firms achieve and sustain superior performance (Heskett et al. 1994; Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger 1997). The service-profit chain proposes that internal service quality (e.g., rigorous human resources management practices and the way people work with each other) drives employee satisfaction, performance, and retention. In turn, these outcomes influence operational efficiency, customer satisfaction

and loyalty, and profitability. Understanding these relationships helps managers focus on the drivers of firm performance, not just the outcomes of performance.

One of the primary means of promoting positive employee interactions is through formal training programs. Surveys indicate that up to half of an organization's training budget is spent on developing interpersonal skills (e.g., Training Magazine 2004). These kinds of programs focus on improving a variety of skills, such as coaching and counseling, conflict resolution, interviewing, performance management, and customer service. Unfortunately, despite significant investments in time and money, such training programs often do not always achieve desired results. One reason is that the skills are not fully developed (e.g., Georges 1996; May and Kahnweiler 2000), which may be due in part to compromises in program design and implementation (e.g., trainees are not given enough time or opportunity to practice the desired behaviors during training). Similarly, lack of follow-up, accountability, incentives, and management support may limit the extent to which individuals apply their newly acquired knowledge and skills on the job (e.g., Taylor, Russ-Eft, and Chan 2005).

Given these concerns, efforts must be taken to understand ways to optimize the effectiveness of interpersonal skills training programs. To this end, the study described here examined the impact of two posttraining interventions—self-coaching and upward feedback—as means to further develop and promote the transfer of interpersonal skills that have been addressed in a formal training program for new restaurant managers. These interventions were designed to reinforce the training content, provide performance feedback,

and direct skill application and continued development when the managers returned to their jobs.

### Previous Research

Most of the research on posttraining interventions to improve the impact of classroom training has focused on goal setting (e.g., Reber and Wallin 1984; Richman-Hirsh 2001; Wexley and Baldwin 1986; Wexley and Nemeroff 1975). The principal contention is that goal setting helps individuals set priorities for transferring (i.e., applying) training content. If individuals establish priorities for transfer, they may be more likely to use their skills on the job. Goal-setting interventions have been implemented either within the classroom or on the job, and they usually involve trainers' or supervisors' active and direct involvement. With respect to content, these interventions emphasize the importance of goal setting, how to establish specific and challenging goals, and how to apply these activities on the job. In general, goal-setting efforts have been found to facilitate improved posttraining performance.

Self-management training is one specific goal-setting intervention that has often been examined to see whether it promotes the transfer of skills for autonomous individuals (e.g., Burke 1997; Gaudine and Saks 2004; Noe, Sears, and Fullenkamp 1990). Proponents of self-management training assume trainees will encounter obstacles on the job, such as time pressures or a lack of social support, and relapse into previous patterns of behavior. This type of intervention is generally facilitated by the trainer within the classroom setting. It focuses on identifying obstacles to transfer and strategies for overcoming them, establishing goals for maintaining

performance over time, monitoring progress toward goal attainment, and self-administering rewards and punishments. The evidence for the impact of self-management training has been mixed. Some research has demonstrated a significant improvement in posttraining performance (Tziner, Haccoun, and Kadish 1991; Noe, Sears, and Fullenkamp 1990), while other studies have not done so (Burke 1997; Gaudine and Saks 2004; Richman-Hirsh 2001; Wexley and Baldwin 1986).

Additional research on posttraining interventions is needed in several respects. It is necessary to examine other types of interventions that might have value for individuals who work autonomously, where structured guidance from others is limited or even nonexistent, such as those in managerial roles. Furthermore, for such individuals, it is useful to examine the impact of interventions embedded in the applied work environment, considering that on-the-job support is key in ensuring training success (Tracey, Tannenbaum, and Kavanagh 1995). Research is also necessary to examine interventions that not only facilitate skill transfer but also further skill development. Trainees may need cues to motivate transfer and tools to help refine their skills in a “real-world” context beyond the classroom. Thus, it is important to examine interventions that serve multiple purposes.

## Self-Coaching and Upward Feedback

We examined two on-the-job post-training interventions that were designed to enhance the effectiveness of a formal interpersonal skills training program for new restaurant managers. In particular, this training focused on developing supervisory skills. One intervention is a self-coaching program, which has not been examined in

prior research. The second intervention is upward feedback. Upward feedback has typically been used and researched as a stand-alone development tool, and this research will examine its effectiveness as an extension of formal training.

*Self-coaching.* In the self-coaching intervention, trainees reflect on their performance and establish transfer enhancement goals for several weeks after training. This intervention consists of three components, starting with a behavioral checklist to assess the frequency of interpersonal skill use. For example, trainees reflect on how often they have established clear and specific goals for subordinates, praised performance improvements, and worked with subordinates to develop performance improvement strategies. In the second component, trainees consider specific incidents by answering open-ended questions (e.g., “Describe the most challenging employee situation you encountered this week. In what ways did you manage the situation well, and how would you handle a similar situation differently in the future?”). The final component is a goal-setting activity in which trainees establish performance maintenance and improvement goals to translate their insight into successful future performance. In sum, the self-coaching program represents a self-appraisal linked to on-the-job performance expectations that were addressed in the formal training program.

The medium for the self-coaching program was a workbook with written assessments and exercises to facilitate the self-reflective and goal-setting efforts. A workbook may be effective for several reasons (Walker 1985). First, written analysis helps individuals to distance themselves from their daily routines. Second, writing helps individuals become more aware of their strengths and areas for improvement. Third, written documentation

allows individuals to monitor their progress over time. While individuals may engage in activities to facilitate performance improvement informally, a workbook provides structure for the process.

The self-coaching program is distinct from previous posttraining interventions in several ways. Compared to the majority of other goal-setting interventions, the program tested here is more autonomous. As such, the program is well suited for employees who have a great deal of latitude and control over their job responsibilities. The self-coaching program also differs from self-management training. The self-coaching program is implemented on the job, while self-management training occurs within the classroom. Accordingly, the self-coaching program could provide greater control over posttraining behavior. Furthermore, the self-coaching program is broader, with an emphasis on performance assessment, identification of strengths and weaknesses, and the development of performance improvement goals.

*Upward feedback.* For the upward feedback intervention, the trainees received performance feedback from their subordinates on the job after training. In previous research, upward feedback has been widely used to enhance interpersonal skills and has generally been found to be beneficial in this respect (Smither, London, and Reilly 2005). Upward feedback can be helpful in several ways in promoting interpersonal skill development. Individuals other than a manager's supervisor, the traditional rater in an appraisal process, may have valid insights into an employee's performance (Borman 1991). A formal system in which raters provide written feedback under conditions of anonymity may facilitate information sharing that might not otherwise be communicated because it may be perceived as too "personal." Furthermore, in the context of manager-subordinate

interactions, subordinates may be less likely to provide feedback due to the legitimate authority and reward power managers possess. Structured assessments, though, provide a medium for feedback to be provided, and providing feedback anonymously allows information to be shared with less fear of negative repercussions.

The upward feedback intervention examined in this study had three primary components. First, the trainees are provided with data regarding the frequency with which they engaged in behaviors addressed during training. Second, they are provided with subordinates' written comments regarding their performance. Third, and parallel to the self-coaching program, trainees are directed to establish performance maintenance and performance enhancement goals to translate insight gained from the feedback received into future performance.

### The Role of Posttraining Interventions in Facilitating Training Transfer

We contend that self-coaching and upward feedback may help trainees use and perfect their interpersonal skills in at least three ways. On a general level, the presence of a posttraining intervention may signal the organization's emphasis on the importance of effective interpersonal skills and thus motivate individuals to apply training content (e.g., Rouiller and Goldstein 1993). With respect to interpersonal skills, supplemental cues may be important for people for whom interpersonal skills are not "hardwired" into their work and who may perceive the use of such skills as discretionary. In the absence of such cues, individuals may neglect interpersonal responsibilities and focus on what they perceive to be more central aspects of work.

The posttraining interventions may also enhance training by reinforcing content addressed in the classroom. Knowledge and skill may decay over time, and “refresher” training may be necessary. Reflecting on expectations for the use of interpersonal skills via the self-coaching or upward feedback interventions may serve as a form of refresher training and may thus direct trainees’ on-the-job efforts (Boud, Keogh, and Walker 1985).

Finally, self-coaching and upward feedback may enhance the impact of formal training by promoting further skill development within the job context itself. Practice opportunities that take place in the classroom, such as role-playing exercises, may be limited in promoting full skill acquisition because trainees are not confronted with the same pressures and consequences for their actions that they face on the job. As such, trainees may not always perceive these exercises as serious learning endeavors, or they may not experience the difficulties and complexities that might interfere with using their newly learned skills. In either case, trainees might not perform as they otherwise would in a natural context where they could receive meaningful developmental feedback. However, posttraining interventions may provide opportunities to develop skills more completely by adding realism to the learning experience.

This discussion is not meant in any way to disregard the importance of formal classroom training, which can serve as a foundation for developing interpersonal skills. However, posttraining interventions may provide a useful means for strengthening the impact of formal training and, thus, ensure that training objectives are more fully realized. In this view, training should not be an isolated classroom activity but, rather, an integrated system of formal classroom and on-the-job activities.

We evaluated the effectiveness of self-coaching and upward feedback by examining their influence on the posttraining performance of four groups of trainees. The first group had no support, just classroom training. The second group had classroom training with self-coaching, and the third group experienced classroom training along with upward feedback. The fourth group used all three techniques: classroom training, self-coaching, and upward feedback.

Based on the discussion and rationale presented above, the following hypotheses were tested:

*Hypothesis 1:* Managers who participated in either posttraining intervention will demonstrate more effective interpersonal skills than those who participated in classroom training only.

*Hypothesis 2:* Managers who participated in the combined self-coaching and upward feedback intervention will demonstrate more effective interpersonal skills than those who participated in either supplement alone.

We also compared the self-coaching and upward feedback interventions to see whether one was a superior supplement to the other. However, since the research on these two posttraining interventions is quite limited, we did not formulate a specific hypothesis. Moreover, given that both interventions include reflective and goal-setting components, it may be difficult to detect a difference between self-coaching and upward feedback.

## Sample and Context

This study was sponsored by a company that owns and operates approximately 120 casual-theme restaurants throughout the United States. Ninety-six trainees began this study, representing all of the chain’s new managers during the study



period; nine managers left the organization prior to the completion of the research. Of the remaining eighty-seven managers, seventy-six were men, their average age was thirty-one years, and they averaged approximately seven years of previous management experience. The trainees were primarily Caucasian (83 percent).

### Training

An established corporate training program that focused on developing supervisory skills provided the foundation for this study. Through this training, the organization aimed to develop the following five general skill sets among the operations managers: (1) clarifying expectations (clearly and regularly communicating performance expectations), (2) monitoring (observing employee performance), (3) rewarding (providing frequent praise and recognition), (4) correcting (addressing performance problems effectively), and (5) inspiring (creating enthusiasm for hard work and effort). The formal training spanned approximately eight hours and included lectures, discussions, video, and role-playing activities.

Exhibit 1 presents five target performance dimensions together with the behavioral indicators that serve four purposes in this study. One, these items reflect the learning points used during training to guide classroom discussion and practice activities. Two, they provide the foundation for the standardized behavioral assessment in the self-coaching program. Three, they serve as one component in the upward feedback assessments. Four, they constitute the posttraining performance dependent variable.

The items for four of the dimensions—clarifying expectations, monitoring, rewarding, and inspiring—are based on

the work of Yukl, Wall, and Lepsinger (1990). Slight wording modifications were made to reflect the specific training objectives and organizational context. Items for the correcting dimension were developed for this study and corresponded to the training program's objectives.

### Design

We assigned different groups of trainees to each of the four training designs. The organization's formal training sessions, which are held in its central training center, are conducted about every other month. Four of these groups were involved in this study, and each received a different combination of training and posttraining intervention. Twenty-one managers participated in classroom training only, twenty-two in classroom training with self-coaching, twenty-three in classroom training with upward feedback, and twenty-one in classroom training with self-coaching and upward feedback. These groups were approximately equivalent with respect to demographic characteristics and previous experience.

The interventions were implemented and the training outcomes assessed during a ten-week period on the job after the formal training. The self-coaching managers received their workbooks during the first week of this period and completed their materials over the following five weeks. The upward feedback managers received a packet for administering the feedback assessments during the third week of the ten-week period. These participants were required to complete survey administration within a week's time and return the completed assessments to us for compilation of their feedback reports. We provided the upward feedback reports to that group of managers during approximately the fifth



**Exhibit 1:**

## Training Performance Dimensions and Corresponding Scale Items

## Clarifying expectations

1. Clearly explains employees' job responsibilities
2. Clearly explains what results employees are expected to achieve
3. Clearly specifies when specific tasks need to be completed
4. Meets with employees to set clear and specific goals
5. Clearly explains what aspects of work have the highest priority

## Monitoring

1. Follows up after making a request to verify that it was done
2. Walks around to observe how employees' work is going
3. Checks on the quality of employees' work (e.g., inspects it, speaks with customers)
4. Checks employees' work against established expectations to see if it's on target

## Rewarding

1. Compliments employees for demonstrating creativity, initiative, persistence, or skill
2. Gives credit for helpful ideas and suggestions
3. Expresses personal appreciation when something is done that requires special effort
4. Recognizes special contributions and important achievements by acknowledging them publicly
5. Praises improvements in performance
6. Rewards employees meaningfully when they perform especially well or complete a large project

## Inspiring

1. Communicates convincingly the importance of high levels of productivity and service
2. Develops enthusiasm for hard work through competition, such as contests and games
3. Proposes challenging but realistic goals to motivate performance
4. Inspires hard work by setting an example through his or her own behavior
5. Develops enthusiasm for hard work by assigning challenging tasks

## Correcting

1. Shows genuine interest in improving employee performance
2. Clearly explains where performance needs to improve
3. Clearly shows employees how to improve their performance
4. Works with employees to develop performance improvement strategies
5. Provides the necessary resources and support to improve performance

**Note:** The scale items for the clarifying expectations, monitoring, rewarding, and inspiring dimensions are based on Yukl, Wall, and Lepsinger (1990). Items for the correcting dimension were specifically developed for this study and corresponded to the training content.

week of the study period. Training outcomes for all the managers were assessed via survey measures at the end of the ten-week period.

*Supplement 1: Self-coaching.* The five-week self-coaching program was composed of four sections. The first section of the workbook was the standardized behavioral assessment using the five performance dimensions in which the trainees assessed their own performance from the previous week. The second section

included four open-ended questions to facilitate self-reflection (see the appendix). The third section was a development plan worksheet in which the trainees were directed to establish three goals for the following week. This worksheet instructed trainees to establish (1) a "continuance" goal (a goal to continue or improve on something one does well), (2) a "stop" goal (a goal to minimize or engage less frequently in a behavior that impedes effective performance), and (3) a "start"

goal (a goal to engage in a specific behavior or activity to improve one's performance). The final section was a development plan follow-up worksheet to help trainees assess the extent to which their goals from section three were achieved. The materials were identical from week to week with two exceptions: (1) week one did not include a development plan follow-up worksheet because trainees had just begun the program, and (2) week five did not include a development plan because it was the final week of the program. To help ensure compliance, every week each trainee was required to obtain his or her general manager's signature on a verification form that confirmed that the trainee completed that week's materials. The form was then faxed to the corporate office to track each trainee's progress.

*Supplement 2: Upward feedback.* The upward feedback assessment packet included the feedback assessments, materials for returning the assessments to the researchers (the "external consultants"), and an accompanying cover letter from the vice president of human resources detailing administration procedures. The feedback assessments included one self-report survey, seven surveys for dining room staff, and seven surveys for kitchen staff. Both the trainee and subordinate surveys included the items from Exhibit 1. The subordinate survey also included a section to provide written comments. Specifically, the subordinates were instructed to provide examples of (1) behaviors the trainee performs well and should continue, (2) behaviors the trainee should start engaging in, and (3) behaviors the trainee should engage in less frequently. Working anonymously, the subordinates completed their assessments during preshift meetings, then returned their assessments to the trainees in sealed envelopes, which were then forwarded directly to the researchers. The

trainees were requested to obtain at least five assessments from both dining room and kitchen staff members. An average of twelve usable subordinate surveys was obtained per trainee, yielding a response rate of 86 percent and reflecting an average of 21 percent of the employees in a restaurant.

The upward feedback report comprised five sections, where the feedback was presented in different forms to provide a comprehensive picture of the trainees' strengths and areas needing improvement. The first three sections presented data on the five performance dimensions, including the self-report ratings, average subordinate ratings, and self-subordinate gaps. The first section provided composite scores for the five dimensions, and the second section provided scores for the individual items. The third section identified the five highest and lowest self-report ratings, average subordinate ratings, and self-subordinate gaps. The fourth section presented the subordinates' comments. The fifth section was a development plan worksheet. Parallel to the self-coaching workbook, the trainees were directed to establish "continuance," "stop," and "start" goals. The sixth section was a development plan follow-up worksheet to later assess goal attainment.

### Control Variables

Several variables were included in the analyses as controls. These variables were general mental ability, the "big five" personality dimensions (i.e., agreeableness, conscientiousness, extroversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience), and previous management experience. General mental ability measures were obtained from personnel records, and measures of personality and previous management experience were obtained at the beginning of the formal training sessions.

*General mental ability.* General mental ability was assessed with the 126-item Thurstone Test of Mental Alertness (Thurstone and Thurstone 2001). The test was administered under the standard twenty-minute, timed protocol.

*Personality.* The “big five” were measured with the NEO Five-Factor Personality Inventory, Form S (Costa and McCrae 1991). Twelve items constituted each dimension, and respondents indicated the extent to which the items described themselves. Response choices ranged from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach’s alphas for these dimension (indicating good reliability) were as follows: agreeableness, .69; conscientiousness, .84; extroversion, .73; neuroticism, .86; and openness to experience, .72.

*Previous management experience.* Trainees indicated their years and months of experience managing others.

### Postintervention Assessment

The postintervention assessment of trainee interpersonal skill performance followed administration guidelines similar to those of upward feedback assessments. For the twenty-five items from Exhibit 1, the trainees’ subordinates indicated how often trainees engaged in the specific behaviors, with a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*frequently, if not always*). The average interrater agreement index (James, Demaree, and Wolf 1984) was .81, and the Cronbach’s alpha was .96. The twenty-five items were averaged to create one overall interpersonal skill performance measure.

## Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Exhibits 2 and 3. Exhibit 2 presents the correlations between the study variables. Exhibit 3 presents the means and standard

deviations of trainee performance for the four training groups.

Multiple regression was used to estimate the effects of the interventions. Participation in self-coaching, upward feedback, or the combined intervention was indicated with three dummy variables, in which 1 represented participation in an intervention and 0 represented no participation. Regression coefficients for the interventions provided estimates for their magnitude and direction beyond classroom training only. Similarly, with respect to the control variables, the regression coefficients provided an estimate of the magnitude and direction for the effect of each. Thirty-two percent of the variance was explained ( $R^2 = .32$ ,  $F$ -statistic = 3.49,  $p < .01$ ) (see Exhibit 4).

The first hypothesis, which proposed that participation in self-coaching or upward feedback would have a positive impact on posttraining performance beyond classroom training only, was supported. The standardized regression coefficient was .24 for self-coaching ( $p < .05$ ) and .42 for upward feedback ( $p < .01$ ).

The second hypothesis, which proposed that participating in the combined intervention would be better than participating in one posttraining intervention, was partially supported. The standardized regression coefficient for the combined intervention was .57 ( $p < .01$ ). Participating in the combined supplement was superior to self-coaching ( $t = 2.94$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, there was no statistically significant difference between the effects of the combined intervention and upward feedback on posttraining performance ( $t = 1.43$ ,  $p = .08$ ).

Our comparison of the effectiveness of self-coaching versus upward feedback did not yield a significant difference. A two-tailed significance test was performed since it was not articulated beforehand

**Exhibit 2:**

## Correlations between Study Variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Posttraining performance	3.45	0.32	(.84)							
2. Previous experience	6.82	6.64	.12	—						
3. General mental ability	70.06	11.36	-.14	-.07	—					
4. Neuroticism	1.04	0.59	-.17	-.30**	.06	(.86)				
5. Extroversion	2.98	0.42	.04	.25*	.00	-.38**	(.73)			
6. Openness to experience	2.45	0.49	-.12	-.16	.12	.07	.14	(.72)		
7. Agreeableness	2.88	0.42	-.01	.13	-.05	-.31**	.37**	.13	(.69)	
8. Conscientiousness	3.24	0.44	.22*	.13	-.06	-.60**	.37**	.11	.27**	(.84)

**Note:**  $n = 87$ . Subordinates' responses regarding posttraining performance were aggregated for each of the eighty-seven trainee-managers; internal consistency estimate is based on the 973 subordinate employee assessments. Internal consistency estimates appear on the diagonal in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$  (one-tailed tests).

**Exhibit 3:**

## Means and Standard Deviations of Posttraining Performance

	Mean	SD	n
Classroom only	3.23	0.29	21
Classroom with self-coaching	3.40	0.30	23
Classroom with upward feedback	3.52	0.26	22
Classroom with combined supplement	3.63	0.29	21

**Exhibit 4:**

## Regression of Posttraining Performance on Posttraining Interventions

Predictor	$\beta$
General mental ability	-.18*
Agreeableness	.01
Conscientiousness	.14
Extroversion	.02
Neuroticism	-.05
Openness to experience	-.15
Previous experience	.04
Openness to experience	-.15
Self-coaching	.24*
Upward feedback	.42**
Combined intervention	.57**
$R^2 = .32$	
$F = 3.49**$	

**Note:**  $n = 87$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$  (one-tailed tests).

which intervention would be more effective. Although the effect of upward feedback on posttraining performance was larger than the effect of self-coaching, the difference between them was not statistically significant ( $t = 1.71, p = .09$ ).

## Discussion

Both training interventions enhanced the managers' interpersonal skills. Managers who participated in either intervention exhibited stronger interpersonal skills than did those individuals who attended formal classroom training only. In addition, the managers who participated in the combined self-coaching and upward feedback intervention exhibited better interpersonal skills than did those who participated in self-coaching only.

Although this study suggests that training can be strengthened by self-coaching or upward feedback, the study does not indicate which one is definitively better as a single posttraining intervention. The average score was higher for the managers who received upward feedback, but the variability in performance among these managers was too large to confidently conclude that the technique is better than self-coaching. Nevertheless, posttraining performance may be better solidified by upward feedback. Individuals may have blind spots regarding their strengths and areas that need improvement. They may thus require feedback from others to facilitate their interpersonal growth. It should be noted that given that both assessments involved reflective and goal-setting components, it may have been difficult to detect a difference between self-coaching and upward feedback.

This study illustrates the usefulness of self-coaching and upward feedback to support formal classroom training in interpersonal skills. Any implementation of these interventions, though, should

be carefully undertaken. Consideration should be paid to the design, necessary organizational support, and trade-offs between self-coaching and upward feedback (if an organization uses just one of the approaches).

*Designing training supports.* One feature that we believe helped ensure that the training supports were effective was that they involved specific performance dimensions that were consistent in the formal classroom training and in the self-coaching and upward feedback interventions. Integration of that type provided reinforcement and continuity. Moreover, specification of the behavioral performance dimensions helped ensure that trainees' performance expectations were clearly defined.

The participants in this study provided suggestions that could enhance the interventions. Those in the self-coaching program recommended distributing the program content over a period longer than five weeks. In addition, some trainees indicated that having more time would help reduce the weekly burden of completing the workbook materials.

Others suggested that providing a greater period of time between completing materials would allow for time for them to put their interpersonal skills to work and, thus, make the development exercise more meaningful. Accordingly, it may be worthwhile to change the program from a weekly developmental exercise over a five-week period to a biweekly activity over a period of ten weeks.

One suggestion for the upward feedback process was to allow a longer period of time for the trainees to be observed on the job prior to having their performance assessed for their formal feedback reports. We and the company's vice president of human resources thought that three weeks was a sufficient period for the subordinates

to observe the performance of their supervisors. However, some trainees and subordinates indicated on their survey responses that they had not had enough interactions to allow an accurate assessment. The value of this procedure is improved when individuals perceive the feedback process as valid and when feedback ratings accurately reflect individuals' development needs.

*Organizational supports.* Research has shown that top management's commitment and the dedication of appropriate resources are critical elements in ensuring that training is successful (Tracey, Tannenbaum, and Kavanagh 1995). Support in this study came from the company's vice president of human resources, who strongly advocated the use of these posttraining interventions. He conducted the formal classroom training, where he introduced the procedures and emphasized the value of extending development beyond the classroom. Through conference calls with general managers and regional directors across the country, the vice president also explained the training interventions, so that these executives would support their manager trainees and ensure their compliance. Finally, the sponsoring organization provided administrative support to monitor trainees' compliance and follow through with them via e-mail and telephone in the event that materials were not submitted in a timely fashion. While different organizations will handle such support in various ways, what appears critical is educating key constituents on the nature of the training activities and providing the means to help guarantee compliance.

*Choosing a particular support system.* When deciding to use one posttraining intervention over the other, one should consider the level of expertise required for the program and the amount of effort it requires. In particular, consideration

should be paid to the extent of an organization's internal expertise in designing and implementing an intervention. An upward feedback system requires more expertise than does a self-coaching program. Among other things, implementing an upward feedback system requires skill in survey design and administration, data collection and analysis, and developing systems to return results back to participants. Implementing a self-coaching program also requires expertise, primarily for the initial design of the program. In addition, attention should be paid to the amount of effort required on the part of trainees and necessary administrative follow-up. The upward feedback intervention required less effort on behalf of the trainees and less administrative follow-up than the self-coaching program. Trainees participating in upward feedback were required to complete self-assessments and obtain feedback from their subordinates just once. In comparison, the self-coaching program required more trainee effort and administrative follow-up as the trainees were required to complete and submit materials each week.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While the results of this study demonstrate the usefulness of the posttraining interventions, it should be noted that one primary limitation of this research was the lack of random assignment of trainees to the training groups and their posttraining restaurants. Ideally, in contrast to how this study proceeded, all individuals would have attended formal classroom training at one point in time, each trainee would have been randomly assigned to one of the four training groups, and the trainees would have been randomly assigned to one of the organization's restaurant units. It is possible that the trainees may have differed in their pretraining levels of interpersonal



skill proficiency. However, the research sponsor maintained consistent selection standards when hiring the new managers, and several variables were used to help control for potential differences in interpersonal skill proficiency.

One avenue for future research is examining the impact of the interventions over time. Although this research provided support for the impact of self-coaching and upward feedback on performance when assessed several weeks after completion of these training interventions, their impact over time is unknown. Previous research has found that skill decay does occur over time in a variety of cognitive and physical skill domains (Arthur et al. 1998), but the degree of skill decay with respect to interpersonal skills has not been a topic of concerted research attention. An understanding of the rate of such decay would provide guidance for determining how often posttraining interventions should be implemented as a form of refresher training.

The applicability of the interventions could be also examined for different skill sets and contexts. For example, self-coaching and upward feedback could be examined as interventions to enhance the effectiveness of team-training efforts. In addition, it may be valuable to examine skill sets where posttraining interventions may not be necessary, including interpersonal skills that are an explicit part of employees' job responsibilities (e.g., customer service skills) or where interpersonal skills are closely supervised by others. In such circumstances, individuals may be more motivated to apply their skills on the job and receive relevant feedback to facilitate performance improvement.

In conclusion, organizations invest substantially in interpersonal skills training, and to ensure that such training achieves its desired impact, follow-up training interventions appear critical. While formal

classroom training provides an excellent beginning to skill improvement efforts, classroom work should be enhanced by additional activities to ensure that skills are applied on the job and more fully develop over time. Our work presented here suggests that self-coaching and upward feedback may be two ways of strengthening such skills.

## Appendix

### Self-Coaching Program Open-Ended Questions

1. Describe the most challenging employee situation you encountered this week. In what ways did you manage the situation well, and how would you handle a similar situation differently in the future?
2. Describe your most successful interaction with an employee this week. What made this encounter particularly effective?
3. Consider an employee situation that you executed "almost right." What worked well, and how could your performance be improved in the future?
4. What behaviors or practices (e.g., clarifying expectations, monitoring, rewarding) do you feel you executed too little or too much this past week? Please explain why you feel you executed these behaviors or practices too much or too little.

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