

Knowledge Worker

What's in A Name? A Case in Point

(September 2019)

Looking Back

In last month's column I suggested that the name or label placed on a problem was an important matter and that the "training" label was a useful one. In this month's column I'll provide an illustrative example. So, let's see why the "training" label is so persistent – and so useful.

A Case in Point

Lois Barnes, a field sales representative, works for Elmo Steffen, who is a district sales manager. Lois isn't doing what she's supposed to be doing. The company wants her to push Product B, but Lois is pushing Product A. Why? For several reasons.

- The commission on Product A is half again that paid on Product B.
- Lois's customers think Product B is a lousy product; it's overpriced and unreliable. Lois shares her customers' opinion of the product.
- Lois believes the quota for Product A is easily met but that the quota for Product B is impossible to meet. (She also believes that the quota for Product B was set unrealistically high so as to be able to "kill" it later on.)
- None of her peers, the other field sales representatives, are having much luck selling Product B either.
- Owing to different order entry systems for the two products, sales of Product A show up in Lois's results the day after the order is entered, but the sales of Product B don't show up until almost two weeks later and, in some cases, they don't show up at all. In turn, this means that Lois receives her commissions much sooner for Product A than she does Product B - if she receives them at all.

Elmo has the situation pegged as a "training" problem. Despite what you might think, Elmo is no dummy. Elmo knows that the reason Lois isn't selling Product A instead of Product B isn't because she doesn't know how to sell or how to sell Product B. In fact, Lois is his very best sales rep. Elmo also knows, in intimate detail, all the many reasons why Lois sells Product A instead of Product B. Yet, he insists on labeling the problem a "training" problem.

Why does Elmo insist on doing that? Well, if the failure to sell Product B in quantities sufficient to meet the quota were labeled a "management" (or worse, a "sales management") problem, Elmo would take the heat. He would be the locus of the problem and the focus of any solution. Attention would be focused on him and action would be directed his way. Elmo certainly doesn't want that.

If the problem were labeled a "feedback" problem, Elmo would be in the politically awkward position of "pointing the finger" at someone in the home office, probably in the systems shop. The same is true if the problem were labeled a problem of "product quality" or "pricing" or "sales reporting" or "incentives." In quick order, Elmo would be pointing the finger at engineering or manufacturing, systems, and perhaps his own management. Elmo is not about to do that; he's a "team player" and a survivor. Elmo also knows that

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he's accountable for results, no matter the obstacles or barriers in his way, and regardless of whether or not they fall under his control or influence. "Make it happen" is the order of the day.

So, under intense pressure from his regional vice president to "do something" about the sluggish sales of Product B, Elmo hires a training consultant to develop some new sales training materials for Product B. Elmo, ever-mindful of the long-term consequences of his actions, softens this blow to the corporate sales training staff by claiming that his market segment has some unique differences that are better addressed locally. Some mumbling and muttering is heard from the head of the sales training staff, but nothing serious. Elmo is free to proceed.

The training consultant, Peter Taylor, is no dummy either. After a couple of days spent poking around, he's got almost as good a fix on the factors driving the situation as Elmo does. Like Elmo, Peter is paid to produce results, regardless of the extenuating or mitigating circumstances. Peter also knows the difference between effective and efficient solutions; namely, that a solution is effective if it produces the desired result and it is efficient if it has no off-setting side effects. Peter also knows that if he insists on labeling the problem for what it really is – a "mess" – and on addressing the underlying factors in a head-on fashion, there could be plenty of "off-setting side effects."

And so, Peter Taylor proposes the following: He will develop and conduct a one-day sales training seminar, focusing on overcoming specific customer objections to Product B. He will also prepare and submit a report detailing the other factors that should be addressed if the proposed training is to have any lasting effect.

The training is subsequently developed and delivered, and the report written and submitted. Elmo forwards the report to his boss who forwards it to the vice presidents for sales, marketing, product development, engineering, manufacturing, and finance. A copy of the report somehow makes its way to the president, who promptly commissions a senior level task force to "iron out the remaining wrinkles in the launch of Product B." Later, Product B is quietly consigned to the scrap heap.

Elmo subsequently receives a note from his boss's boss, congratulating him on his extremely diplomatic handling of the "sales" problem. The note makes no specific mention of Product B.

Summary

"Training" is a safe and useful way to label a problem. It situates the locus of the problem with the performers and it publicly focuses on remedying what are generally excusable knowledge or skill deficiencies. In other words, "training" problems are understandable and forgivable; other kinds of problems are not so forgivable.

The "training" label does not "point the finger" at any one for any reason that might bring grief to the accused (leading me to conclude that the "training" label constitutes its very own form of "no fault" insurance for managers).

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About the Author

Fred Nickols is an organizational generalist, a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated Chief Petty Officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the Managing Partner at [Distance Consulting LLC](#), where he is the *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer*. His web site is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns is available [here](#).