Openside

Why (most) training is *still* useless and what leaders can do about it
Special Report

Introduction

In 2006, David Maister argued that "the majority of business training is **a waste of money and time,** because only a microscopic fraction of training is ever put into practice and the hoped-for benefits obtained."

Over a decade later and research suggests his assertion remains worryingly pertinent.

While it might be hard to admit, the ineffectiveness of training in many professional services firms is often a direct result of the **perceived** attitudes and behaviours of the firm's leaders towards training.

In this four-part special report, we begin by examining participants' continuing scepticism of training based on their overriding perceptions of leaders' attitudes towards the training programmes they attend and the perceived value – or lack of it – often placed on what they have learned once they return to the office.

The second half of the report will suggest how leaders can turn the situation around in their firms, by adopting a 'Broken Windows' strategy as famously used in New York in the early 1990s.
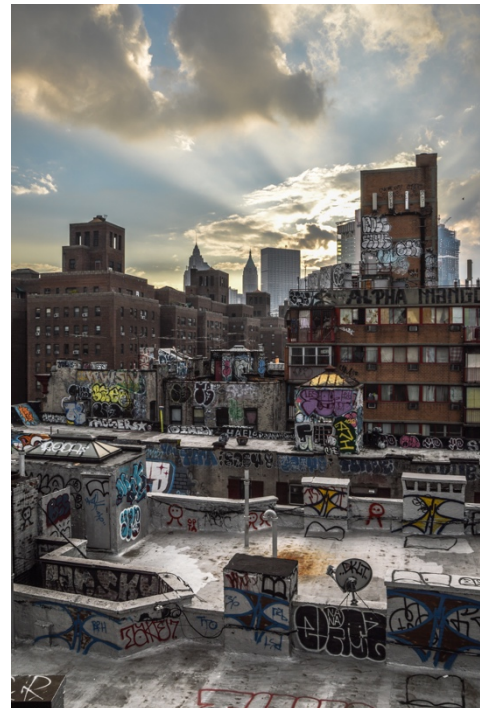
Part 1: The continued scepticism of participants towards training in professional services

Over a decade ago, David Maister made a damning assessment on the state of training in professional services firms.

Mostly, he argued, **it is useless**.

The uncomfortable truth for those of us responsible for learning and development is that many of training's shortcomings highlighted by Maister still appear to ring true today.

Despite enthusiasm during individual training programmes, many working within professional services remain sceptical regarding the effectiveness of training in general.

As Maister predicted, participants still see training as a standalone 'tick box' exercise, a nice opportunity to learn new behaviours and concepts, but for the most part a redundant exercise – unlikely to be something that firms who have invested heavily in training initiatives want to hear or admit.

And here is something else they probably don't want to hear or admit: one of the main reasons Maister believed (most) training was useless over a decade ago and why participants still believe they won't be able to apply these ideas back in the workplace is **the perceived attitude and behaviours of senior leadership towards training**[1]…

"Our managers haven't been trained in this new approach"

"We won't have time to use these ideas or behaviours back in the office"

"Our Partners don't follow these processes"

The result of leadership's perceived indifference is that people who have attended training programmes **simply accept** that they will "*go back to the way they have always worked*" **resigned to the fact** "*that's just the way things are around here.*"

What leaders of professional services firms often fail to recognise is that when it comes to changing behaviours – the aim of most training programmes – then **perception is everything**.

Whether training initiatives are successful (or not) comes down to employees' **perception** of which behaviours the firm legitimises and whether the leaders of the firm have the desire, power, appetite

or willingness to coach, model and ultimately 'police' the adoption of the newly trained skills, behaviours and frameworks.

In part 2 of this report, we will examine the negative perceptions of leaders' attitudes towards training held by many in the workforce and why these prevailing beliefs might beg the question "what's the point of training?" in many professional services firms…

Footnote

[1] Following each of our training programmes, we ask participants "*What difficulties do you anticipate in applying what you have learned?*" These are some of the answers we have received from the last year.

Part 2: The negative perceptions of leaders' attitudes towards training in firms

Unfortunately, within many professional services firms, the following perceptions prevail among the workforce:

Perception 1 – Our leaders are indifferent to the firm's training initiatives:

In many firms, as long as hours are billed, projects run adequately, utilisation is high and clients don't complain, then senior leaders have little motivation or inclination to ask people to move from the status quo.

But if the status quo is acceptable, and leaders are happy for everyone to carry on working in the way they have always done, indeed, if **they**, the firm's leadership, are not inclined to stop working in the way they have always done, why should anyone else use newly acquired skills or behaviours? As Maister notes:

"Too often junior people are sent off to be trained and they continue to speculate whether their seniors or leaders are really committed and serious about the topics being discussed. As previously noted, they often are not."

Senior leaders might point to their firm's values, principles or mission statements to refute this argument.

However, the critical point is: values are what not what you aspire to ("*we are truly committed to the training and development of all our employees*"), **values are what you are prepared to enforce** with consequences for non-compliance (as outlined by Maister in this 'Values in Action' podcast), which leads us neatly onto the next prevailing perception…

Perception 2: The use of new skills is not only not encouraged – applying them can actually be riskier in the short term:

Within some firms, the overriding perception is that there are **no consequences** for not using the behaviours, skills or tools learned on a training programme.

Indeed, in many firms – which remain 'activity driven' – the consequences of using the newly adopted behaviours, skills and frameworks can be *worse* than not using them.

Consider the accounting firm employee who runs a successful audit but takes longer because they were adopting a new approach for the first time. Will management be pleased because the employee

successfully used the newly acquired approach or disappointed because recovery rates for that client will be lower?

If old ways of working continued to be tolerated, what is the motivation for anyone to change their behaviour?

Perception 3: Lack of alignment on what people are trained in and how they are managed:

In many firms, there remains little alignment between training initiatives and how people are managed or measured. This is most evident when considering the key performance metrics still used in many firms.

Rather than performance being measured on the application of the new behaviours, participants find themselves being judged on traditional 'sacred cow' performance metrics – such as billable hours, utilisation and chargeable time.

In many law firms for example, where billable hours remain a key indicator of performance, are individuals really motivated to try newly acquired behaviours that might bring efficiencies and reduce the number of hours they bill?

"What's the Point?"

In summary, if an employee attends a training programme with the predominant perception that when she returns to the firm her managers won't use the learned behaviours themselves, that she will be given little opportunity to put the learning into practice and there will be no consequences for not adopting the learning, no doubt she has a right to question **"what's the point of the training programme?"**, resigned to the fact that nothing will change.

Firms will continue to waste precious time, money and resources on training initiatives with little impact beyond the initial learning event unless they commit to some fundamental changes.

Professional services leaders need to show they have the desire, influence, clout and motivation to ensure the adoption of newly learned skills and behaviours.

But how?

How can management change employees' perceptions so that they view training as a vital component of the firm's success? How can leadership ensure training initiatives lead to behaviour change well beyond the learning event? How can leaders remove the prevailing apathy and snap people out of their malaise towards training initiatives?

For inspiration, we would like to take you back in time to New York City in the early 1990s…

Part 3: The Broken Windows Strategy in New York

In the second half of our Special Report we explore how leaders can stop (most) training being useless in their firms, by adopting a 'Broken Windows' strategy as famously used in New York in the early 1990s.

25 years ago, New York city was in decline. Rather than "The Big Apple", TIME magazine dubbed the city "The Rotting Apple." Crime levels were high, unemployment was rising and infrastructure was in a state of disrepair.

What made the situation worse was that, rather than trying to return to the boom years of previous decades, New York's residents were simply *resigned to the fact* that this situation was the new norm.

The Mayor of New York at that time, Rudy Giuliani, was determined to pull the city out of its malaise by implementing an innovative policing approach based on the 'Broken Windows' theory first introduced by Wilson and Kelling in 1982.

Perception is everything

At its heart, the Broken Windows approach relies on the notion that to change behaviours **– perception is everything.**

The theory states that by stamping out small crimes (such as vandalism, public drinking, and toll-jumping) the **signal** is sent that no criminal behaviour of any kind will be tolerated. An atmosphere of order and lawfulness is created, and more serious crimes are prevented from taking place.

"Consider a building with a few broken windows. If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building, and if it's unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside."
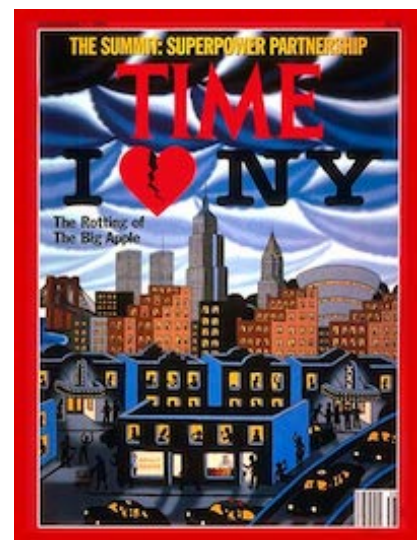
In New York, Giuliani told his police force to take a zero-tolerance approach to every crime, no matter how small. Famously he started to clamp down on squeegee men, subway fare dodgers, prostitution, public drinking, public urination and graffiti artists.

In doing so, Giuliani **signalled** to the whole city that no criminal behaviour, however inconsequential, would be tolerated. He sent a clear message to the population that "*this is the way things will be around here from now on*".

In New York, a new standard of order and lawfulness began to be perceived by the population. Residents began to come out of their malaise and realise there was a better alternative to "*it's just the way things are*".

Whereas a hypothetical – or literal – 'broken window' (graffiti, prostitution, fare dodging) suggested disorder, negligence and a lack of cohesion, a city without any 'broken windows' suggested a culture of unity, social responsibility and strong values.

Then something interesting happened.

The population started to regulate the new norm themselves. They began to exert a level of informal social control over those whose behaviour did not fit the standards expected in that community.

Negative behaviours that were previously 'acceptable' became uncomfortable because the prevailing culture of the community had changed from one of disorder, negligence and lack of cohesion, to one of unity, social responsibility and strong values.

Quite simply, "if you choose not to abide by the socially acceptable norms and standards of the community, we will not tolerate your behaviour and exclude you."

The results of the 'Broken Windows' strategy in New York were impressive. The rates of both petty crime and serious crime fell dramatically and continued to fall for the rest of the decade.

We believe there may be something today that professional services firms can learn from New York city of the early 90s…

Author Michael Levine has written an excellent book "Broken Windows, Broken Business: How the smallest remedies reap the biggest rewards" which outlines the Broken Windows theory in more detail. You can find the book here.

Part 4: What leaders can do about it? How to apply a Broken Windows Strategy in your firm

In the final part of our Special Report, we examine how professional services leaders can adopt a 'Broken Windows' strategy in their firm to alter their employees' antipathy towards training initiatives.

We suggest leaders can do this by making it clear what will and will not be tolerated, by sending out clear signals to employees that the firm is one of cohesion, social responsibility and strong values and closely monitoring behaviour.

Ultimately, "the way things are done around here" can and will change but leaders need to start fixing some broken windows…

Adopting a Broken Windows Strategy in your firm

Here's how we believe professional services leaders can adopt a 'Broken Windows' strategy in their firm, similar to the New York case, to alter their employees' antipathy towards training initiatives and to prove that "the way things are done around here" can change.

For clarity, we have grouped our suggestions by three key components of the 'Broken Windows' strategy: 'Social Norms', 'Social Signalling' and 'Monitoring'.

Social Norms:

Make it very clear what will and will not be tolerated in your firm – undesirable behaviours that may have become 'the norm' will no longer be acceptable:

1. Zero-tolerance: There should be clear, non-negotiable standards for behaviour with consequences for non-compliance. Adopt a zero-tolerance approach for those who refuse to change the way they work after a training programme.

2. Set the example: After a training programme, everyone – especially leaders – needs to adopt, embody and exemplify the new approach. If a Partner in a firm continues to use an old approach – why should anyone change theirs? As Maister said:

"What behaviours by top management need to change to convince people that the new behaviours are really required, not just encouraged?"

3. Leaders attend the same training: As Maister surmised:

"If the behavior is going to be optional, then so should the training be."

We have often found that when someone reaches Partner level, they no longer attend training programmes. It is obvious the perception this sends to the rest of the firm: "Do what I say, not what I do"

Social Signals:

Send out clear signals to your employees that we are a firm of cohesion, social responsibility and strong values, with high expectations for behaviour. To be blunt: "If you don't like it, you can leave" …

4. Operational Values: Your values need to be functional – not aspirational. There is no point stating how much you value training if everyone perceives in their day to day activities that this is not the case.

It's worth repeating: standards and values are not defined by neat mission or value statements (aspirations) but by what the firm is prepared to enforce.

5. Clear and agreed behaviours firm-wide: There is little point training people in new ways of working if there is a perception that these haven't been defined, agreed and shared firm wide.

We are not suggesting that all 'rules', 'standards', 'approaches' and 'behaviours' must be codified or written down – they can be informal.

However, in top performing firms where values are agreed, shared and exemplified, there is rarely disagreement about what is and isn't acceptable "around here" and non-compliant behaviours are dealt with quickly and transparently at every level.

For this to be enabled 'feedback' needs to become a cornerstone of the culture and not just 'top down'.

6. Align training with metrics: New skills, behaviours and frameworks must be aligned with your firm's performance metrics. It is very difficult to signal to employees that you want them to adopt new ways of working if they perceive conflicting messages around what is and is not expected of them.

Monitoring:

By fixing 'broken windows' as soon as they are found, you send the signal that the firm is closely monitoring behaviour. Consequently, employees are less likely to return to the way they have always worked after a training programme.

7. Monitor: Non-compliant behaviours are dealt with quickly and transparently at every level. After a training programme, leaders must be proactive in checking whether new approaches are being adopted across the firm.

Strict 'policing' in a professional services firm is unrealistic and unnecessary but leaders need to be alert and to see for themselves the approaches people are using and gently feedback on unwanted behaviours.

For this to be enabled, 'feedback' needs to become a cornerstone of the culture and not just 'top down' – are your Partners ready for feedback on their behaviours too?

8. Consequences: There need to be consequences for not using newly acquired behaviours. We are not suggesting that consequences should be draconian or overly formal, instead leaders need to have a simple discussion regarding which ways of working are and are not acceptable.

There are two key considerations here:

i. Firms should ensure they have management teams who are able to undertake these types of potentially difficult coaching discussions.

ii. Firm leaders need to have a clear mandate to challenge anyone who is not following the new behaviours

9. Consistency: Crucial to the broken windows strategy is consistency. Leaders cannot overlook any deviation from the agreed behaviours as this could signal that you are willing to overlook a more serious departure in the future. There must be a 'doctrine of consistency'.

This will be particularly difficult if the short-term benefit of deviating from the new behaviour is hard to resist. For example, could you insist that an employee uses a newly learned approach even if it meant on this occasion they would find it harder to meet the deadline?

10. Courage: It is not trite to say that leaders need to show courage and bravery to challenge those failing to demonstrate the required behaviours, particularly if it is a fellow Partner or Senior Manager. Consistency demands 'one rule for all'.

More Examples of 'Broken Windows' in professional services firms:

Within professional services firms, it is easy to see how the 'Broken Windows' theory might be applied to other scenarios beyond training.

Below we have listed some 'broken windows' we have found in professional services firms which might seem inconsequential at the time but which send signals to employees about **the way things are done around here** and influence future behaviours.

Leaders should ask: By taking these actions, what signals do we send to the rest of the firm and our clients? If we continually condone and tolerate these behaviours, what will become acceptable next?

- Going for a tender opportunity, even if it is a long shot, because "you just know you'll get this one"
- Lowering the fee to sign up a client at whatever the cost – "just this once…"
- Sending emails to your team at 3am
- Checking or answering your phone during a meeting
- Using slides in presentations with hundreds of words and confusing diagrams
- Excusing yourself from a meeting at very short notice
- Partner's timekeeping!

It's time for professional services leaders to fix their 'broken windows'

Much like New York in the early 1990s, many employees in professional services firms continue to be *resigned to the fact* that whatever they learn on a training programme, they will not be able to apply their learning back in the office because "that's just not the way things are done around here."

The result is the overriding perception that training is meaningless, insignificant and inconsequential, with indifference and apathy the prevailing attitudes.

However hard it is to admit, predominant perceptions and attitudes held by employees towards training are a direct result of the attitudes and behaviours they perceive the firm's leaders attach to training.

We believe a 'broken windows' approach provides an excellent framework to addressing the failure of training initiatives.

Leaders must send the signal to employees that unwanted behaviours will not be tolerated; they must exemplify the behaviours and standards they expect to see; and actively demonstrate that behaviour is being monitored, with consequences for non-compliance.

While it may initially be difficult for leaders to change their employees' perception that they are indifferent towards training – but there is some good news.

Once employees do start to recognise the value placed on training, and desired behaviours start to be embedded and shared firm-wide, managers need do little to sustain the change because the employee group will enforce the standard.

In other words, employees will not 'break a window' in the first place because they know that this non-compliant behaviour won't be tolerated by their colleagues in the firm.

Maister was right, (most) training in professional services firms is still not achieving the results stakeholders would want to see.

Professional services leaders need to prove to their teams they have the desire, influence, clout and motivation to ensure the adoption of newly learned behaviours, skills or frameworks.

Returning to the way we've always worked after a training programme will not be an option because, categorically, "that is not the way things are done around here any more".

It's time for the leaders in your firm to start fixing some broken windows.

The **Openside** Approach

We are not a "training" firm

Too often, "training" is a standalone, off-the-shelf, tick box solution delivered by trainers who are parachuted in, work from a manual to deliver a fixed programme – often based on a standard process or mnemonic – and have no clear idea of the context you operate in. The result is that learning is rarely shared, exemplified or even used after the learning event.

The Openside Approach is different

- We ensure your professional development is directly aligned with your firm's strategic objectives.

- We invest significant time understanding your current context, firm-wide strengths and weaknesses and the strategic position you want to reach.

- We don't force you into our programmes. Our content is designed and delivered to fit your context.

- We believe that intensive and interactive classroom-based programmes are the best way to develop the behavioural skills required in professional services.

We'll work with your best and brightest, and meet them at their level

- Our tutors all have senior backgrounds in professional services. They are not 'script readers' but have the calibre and experience to include live opportunities and live cases into most programmes.

- Our deep knowledge and experience within professional services ensures we can help you make the strategic case for your professional development plan.

- We know that post-programme feedback is important — but ensuring measurable and demonstrable value well after the programme has ended is more important.