

# Improving Management Development Through Relapse Prevention Strategies

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*This article will focus on a powerful hurdle to productive management practices: "relapse", or the lack of significant long-term skill retention following management development programmes.*

It had happened so many times before. That is what made it seem so discouraging. It was only one week ago that our middle managers were participating enthusiastically in a management development seminar. Motivation was high. The trainers were skilful. Today, we are in the middle of a busy week back at work. Our high hopes for greater productivity through management skill development are eroding quickly in a flood of piled-up paperwork, and a multitude of meetings. Even the carefully crafted action plan we agreed to at the conclusion of the training seminar seems ineffective against the relentless flow of work.

For trainers and trainees alike, this scenario is repeated frequently. The feelings of helplessness experienced by managers motivated to retain new skills after they return to work are reminiscent of efforts to paddle upstream. Much effort is expended, but little progress is realised.

Three causes of the relapse problem will be reviewed here:

- organisations do not adequately support skill retention efforts;
- trainers do not emphasise skill retention training;
- trainees do not have a systematic method for diagnosing and coping with threats to their own skill retention problems.

The Relapse Prevention Model will be proposed as a methodology to enhance skill retention and as a data-based diagnostic tool to alert both individuals and organisations to circumstances that sabotage training efforts.

## **The Skill Retention Problem**

Estimates of relapse in management training efforts tend to support the depressing scenario which introduced this article. They range as high as 90 per cent[1]. Even management trainers who might be expected to inflate retention statistics predicted that 40 per cent of the content of their training is applied immediately after training and only 15 per cent is used 12 months later[2]. Such grim estimates suggest that even in effective training programmes managers acquire skills, implement them only briefly, and then fail to maintain them at work. If we accept these estimates of high relapse rates, then the 20 to 30 billion dollars spent annually for training is not providing organisations with a strong return on their investment. Efforts to explore the causes and solutions to the skill retention problem must be enhanced.

The problem of relapse and lack of skill retention after management training can be reviewed from the perspective of the organisation, the trainer, and the trainees themselves.

### **Organisational Factors that Cause Relapse**

According to a recent study of HRD leaders[3], organisations do not adequately support skill retention efforts when the employee returns to the workplace. Despite empirical evidence that on-the-job performance can be improved and maintained by such reinforcements as contingent praise, performance feedback, and goal setting, such efforts are not given the top-down support that they require to become organisational policy.

Schermerhorn[4] reviewed reasons why top management may not support planned change efforts in health care organisations. They included greater attention to external matters, difficulty in measurement of such efforts, and a desire to attend to problems that are simpler, briefer and more easily explainable to their board of directors.

More recently, Marx[5] considered why the superiors of management trainees fail to adequately support skill retention. In the competing priorities of the hectic work environment organisational rewards are typically provided to employees who make measurable contributions to organisational objectives. Thus management efforts are more likely to be rewarded for activity that shows up quickly in "bottom line" data such as sales, than for long-term efforts of skill retention.

Furthermore, some supervisors may not have the sophistication or training to notice and support appropriate usage of modern management techniques. When managers do not intervene in a smoothly functioning work group morale and productivity may increase. This correct

behaviour may not be noticed by the superior who is focusing on the noisy deliberations of the subordinates.

Finally, organisational norms against evaluation and political factors add to the forces which keep organisational support less than it should be. This support is a powerful factor in efforts to retain management skills on the job.

The economic and political realities of organisational life appear resistant to change. While training professionals continue to emphasise to organisations the need for new paradigms that consider training objectives, both Schermerhorn and Marx suggest that we must simultaneously explore options that address the skill retention effort *without the support of top management*.

### **Trainer Factors that Cause Relapse**

In the changing workplace of the eighties, managers are being exposed to new generations of employees who are expecting to participate in decision making and have more autonomy at work. Managers are urged to "search for excellence", apply "one minute" interventions that will enhance employee morale and productivity, and develop expertise at everything from corporate culture to personal computers. Management development specialists have kept pace with this fluid environment through innovative offerings designed to help managers acquire these new skills.

While trainers can be applauded for their ingenuity in creating state of the art modules they must be criticised for their intense focus on skill acquisition efforts often at the expense of transfer and retention efforts. Such behaviour is understandable. Developing management development programmes is creative work. Delivering such programmes taps the processing expertise of training professionals. During the skill acquisition effort the trainer/consultant is typically in control of the environment. Effective trainers employ modelling, feedback and reinforcement and other effective techniques in a contingent manner.

Once the learner leaves this setting, which is primarily focused on training objectives, the locus of control shifts to the organisation and the trainees themselves[6]. It is a scene similar to that of parents of children starting college and giving up the control of their daily life and hoping that the skills they learned will help them make the "right" decisions. Unfortunately, management trainers have only days rather than years to teach their skills and values to trainees.

After training, supports are available in much less frequent or controllable ways. If trainees belong to organisations that minimally sup-

port the skill retention effort, only their own self-management skills may be left to help them overcome the competing priorities at work. When training focuses primarily on skill acquisition, managers return to work with skills untested in the turbulent waters of the organisation. Their expectations of competence are quickly shattered in the "rapids" they must negotiate and their self-efficacy and trust in training is lowered.

### **Individual Factors that Cause Relapse**

An executive recently compared the conclusion of a management development programme to a New Year's Eve party. Aside from obvious comparisons of sharing a drink to commemorate an important event, she referred to the camaraderie and feeling of optimism that surrounded new resolutions to discard ineffective old behaviours and to embrace new productive ones. In the spirit of the moment, cigarette smoking gave way to visions of aerobic exercise, authoritarian decision style to flexible, contingency-based decision making. Obstacles to these lofty intentions seemed trivial.

Yet the harsh reality of New Year's Day or the first week at work saw the first slippage of these intentions, a cigarette during the bowl games and a sharp word for a trusted subordinate. By Valentine's Day the exercise outfit was in the closet and the management trainee could barely remember the training topic.

Management trainers are not strangers to this phenomenon. Without environmental support and continued training, new skills are more difficult to retain. And yet we all know individuals who *have* retained new behaviours. They continue to jog in winter or praise employees even when under time pressure. Such individuals are often described as having great "willpower". Closer examination of such successful behaviour indicates that these individuals use self-management skills to create their own rewards and warnings of impending danger when the environment does not provide them. Without training in self-management techniques, designed to help individuals control key parts of the environment to promote long-term self-gain, a weak link exists for the productive application of management training.

In summary, relapse forces in skill retention can be diagnosed at the organisational, trainer, and individual levels. When organisations do not provide adequate support for skill retention, trainers can reduce the likelihood of relapse by emphasising retention skills as part of a learning module. Armed with self-management skills, trainees need not rely solely on the organisation to support skill retention.

### **Relapse Prevention Training**

The Relapse Prevention (RP) model is a set of self-management strategies designed to be used following training [7]. Based on the old maxim, "We

can learn a lot from our mistakes”, managers can often identify *during* training which situations pose a substantial risk to their ability to retain a desired skill. They can reduce the unpredictability of the work environment by anticipating and practising situations likely to occur that may threaten their performance at work. Because trial and error learning includes most errors on the earlier trials, managers are taught to expect rather than fear such errors and understand rather than repress them.

RP training consists of a set of strategies designed to help trainees retain skills they have learned in management development workshops when they return to their jobs. The training process has several goals. First, it provides trainers with a set of concrete techniques that can be easily included in any management development programme to increase attention to skill retention. RP strategies allow each trainee to diagnose how his or her skill might be vulnerable to a lapse and how he or she can remedy the problem. Finally, the data from trainees’ perceptions of difficult situations can be fed back to the organisation to help them refine the training effort or modify organisational practices where they conflict with training objectives. These RP strategies are skill-building techniques and diagnostic assessment tools for trainees and the organisations that employ them.

RP training includes seven steps: (I) choosing a skill to retain, (II) setting an appropriate retention goal, (III) making a commitment to retain the skill, (IV) learning the RP strategies, (V) predicting the circumstances of the first lapse, (VI) practising skill necessary to cope with difficult situations, (VII) monitoring the target behaviour following training. The steps of RP training are illustrated by the case example in Figure 1.

### *Step I. Choosing a Skill to Retain*

Because RP strategies are part of a self-management programme, the skill chosen must be (a) desired, (b) susceptible to relapse, and (c) operationally defined and quantifiable. Interactive behaviours that make up the leadership and motivating role of the manager are more susceptible to relapse than technical behaviours such as inventory control. Such interactive behaviours are also harder to define and quantify. Because clear goal setting and monitoring depend on clear definitions, this crucial step often requires trainer assistance. It is not atypical for management trainers to begin with the behaviour, “Be nicer to my employees”, and proceed to praise employees for a job well done, and finally praise at least five employees a minimum of once a day when they meet production quotas.

### *Step II. Setting a Goal*

Once a behaviour is selected to be retained, an appropriate goal must be set. Employee performance usually improves when challenging goals are set. The last step of skill selection requires trainees to operationally define the behaviour. At this time the desired frequency of usage must be determined and the parameters of the slip and relapse must be quantified. For example, any two consecutive days where five employees are not praised when they have met production quotas could be selected as a slip. Any week where this target behaviour did not occur could be identified as a relapse. Thus the goal-setting effort selects the desired behaviour frequency, the slip serves as a warning sign that the goal is in jeopardy and the relapse identifies a more serious disengagement from skill retention efforts.

### *Step III. Making a Commitment to Retain the Skill*

Having set a behavioural goal in quantifiable terms helps keep trainees focused on their intentions to retain a skill at a high performance level. A decision matrix illustrated in Figure 1 serves this purpose. The matrix is completed by trainees as a way of organising and prioritising the reasons *they* wish to retain the skill. Trainees are asked to list the positive and negative consequences for using and not using the skill. This matrix can serve as a reminder that when the short-term positive consequences of not using the skill threaten to push the threshold of motivation back, the long-term negative results can be easily reviewed.

The example in Figure 1 shows how a manager trained in group decision-making skills can be reminded of her original reasons to use them even though time pressure and some loss of control tempt her to lapse in her commitment. Setting a goal gives the trainee a target to shoot for. The decision matrix helps the trainee recall why the goal is important to her under circumstances where there is temptation to lapse.

### *Step IV. Applying the RP Strategies*

After trainees choose an appropriate quantifiable skill to retain, set a retention goal that is challenging, and describe their reasons for wanting this outcome, they are ready to learn the RP strategies. These strategies are designed to increase awareness of past and present circumstances that surround the skills to be maintained at work. With increased awareness of potential "trouble spots", managers can more effectively diagnose where they must be most prepared for obstacles to maintenance of new behaviour. A number of the strategies are also illustrated in the Figure 1 case.

## Figure 1. Relapse Prevention Case Example

Carol Cassidy has been an effective manager, but shows reluctance to allow her subordinates to share in important decisions even though their input would be useful. Because work is so hectic, there doesn't seem to be time to meet as a group. In the management development seminar on group decision making, Ms Cassidy becomes motivated to initiate group decisions. Here is how she uses the Relapse Prevention Model.

- I. CHOOSE A SKILL (IN DETAIL) *Regular group decisions with my work team on important issues where their input can result in a superior solution.*
- II. SET THE GOAL
  - A. SKILL RETENTION *At least two scheduled group decisions per week.*
  - B. SLIP (temporary lapse) *Any week where no group decision was scheduled.*
  - C. RELAPSE (permanent lapse) *Any month where no group decision was made.*
- III. COMMIT TO RETAIN THE SKILL  
THE DECISION MATRIX:

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Using group decisions	Better decisions Higher morale	Takes too much time
Not using group decisions	I'm in control	Employees resist my ideas

### IV. APPLY THE STRATEGIES

Strategies	My Example	My Remedy
● Training/Job differences	Unlike training, I get little feedback from busy supervisors	I will schedule two hours Friday afternoon to discuss and practise participative decision making with my group. I'll ask my boss to attend and give me feedback.
● Support network	Once I leave training I turn to business as usual.	Mr Kastin, Mr Thomas and I will meet twice a week to monitor our skill development.
● High risk	Toward the end of the week when work piles up.	I will schedule our first group decision meeting during a lull in the week.
● S.U.B.T.L.E.	Schedule a participative decision as the last item on a crowded agenda.	Make sure that group decision is the first item on the agenda.
● Commitment Violation Effect	I blame myself for not mastering group decision making quickly.	I will expect to feel some self-blame for errors.
● Diagnose support skills	Poor time management skills will sabotage my attempts at participatory decision making.	I will take the in-house course to improve my time management skills.
● Consequences	My boss only notices productivity, not the management skills that lead to it.	I will tell my boss about the skill, invite her to a meeting, and ask for her feedback.

Each of the fourteen strategies is described briefly to trainees along with examples provided by the trainer. This is followed by work related examples developed by the trainees as they fill out their assessment forms. The fourteen strategies are divided into four categories of behavioural self-management and are briefly described.

### *RP Strategies to Help Anticipate and Monitor Potential Difficulties*

#### *(1) Understand the relapse process*

The first strategy is generic and provides a road map for the management trainee to anticipate the steps of the relapse process. The RP trained manager has great awareness of the road that must be travelled to achieve long-term skill retention. Each step is considered vital. Errors are accepted with grace. The RP trained manager waits for the right moment to practise new skills.

#### *(2) Recognise differences between training and work setting*

The training setting often provides a more supportive environment for learning new skills than one finds back on the job. Time to practise the skill, feedback from experts, and videotape equipment may create over-confidence in one's ability to retain skills back at work.

#### *(3) Create an effective support network on the job*

Co-workers can be identified who are likely to be supportive of the skill retention objectives. Their feedback and assistance can be helpful in avoiding slips. Trainees can create this organisational support from co-operative superiors or subordinates, and from colleagues who have attended the same training seminar.

#### *(4) Expect subordinates to be sceptical of new behaviours: the subordinate believability effect*

Many managers who have experienced RP training have been concerned that attempts to implement novel approaches with their employees would be seen as manipulative and insincere. Sudden praise from a normally critical person may be made more believable if the employee is told what the manager is trying to do.

#### *(5) Identify high risk situations*

Managers are asked to recall past situations which had been "trouble spots" for their retention of new learning and then anticipate current and future circumstances at work that were likely to pose difficulties in implementing the new skill. These



cognitive “fire drills” can identify cues that are *intrapersonal* (lack of self-confidence, anxiety), *interpersonal* (argumentative situations), or *environmental* (equipment breakdown, end of the fiscal year, a difficult person at work).

(6) *Avoid implementing new skills in overwhelming situations*

Developing skills must first be tried in situations which afford the opportunity for success. By carefully choosing the setting for implementing new training, such as with co-operative co-workers and without time pressures, competency can be gradually shaped.

(7) *Recognise seemingly unimportant behaviours that lead to errors*

Seemingly unimportant decisions early in a chain of events can put a manager in a situation where the new skills are overwhelmed. An individual attempting to abstain from smoking might provide an habitual response to an airline ticket agent’s question of where he would like to be seated and soon find himself in the smoking section of the plane and with an offer of a cigarette to be dealt with. Similarly, a manager recently described his attempt to increase his use of praise for strong performance by his sales people in the field and “realised that he never carried their personnel files with him and did not have the hard data regarding their performance”.

*RP Strategies to Increase Rational Thinking*

(8) *Reduce emotional reactions that interfere with learning: the Commitment Violation Effect*

Managers who have broken their commitment to implement their new skill may experience predictable emotional consequences. Managers who lapse early in the trial-and-error process may be prone to more irrational self-blame or to blaming the inadequacy of training for predictable errors. Typically, these responses are self-defeating and interfere with a rational approach to improved performance. Expecting these reactions as “normal” responses to temporary failure can reduce their impact on the manager.

(9) *Retain self-confidence after temporary errors*

One’s feeling of self-efficacy is related to the likelihood that one can “handle” a situation. Since temporary errors are inherent in the learning curve, lowered self-efficacy is a typical result of temporary failure. When the Commitment Violation Effect described above triggers the manager’s defence mechanism and exaggerates a lapse from a unique event (“I didn’t have the skill to handle *that* difficult situation”) to a characterological identi-

ty ("I'm just not cut out to be a manager"), self-efficacy will drop. Hope of regaining control of the rational learning process is likely to be reduced.

#### *RP Strategies to Diagnose and Practise Related Support Skills*

(10) *Diagnose specific support skills necessary to retain new behaviour*

Managers who view training as a holistic process realise that any skill is made up of many subskills. Like a person on a diet who is stymied by poor time management skills and thus cannot succeed in a programme that requires slow eating, managers may fail to implement group decision skills because of skill deficits in time management or in communications skills. High risk situations often help identify such deficits in related support skills.

(11) *Review lifestyle patterns that interfere with skill retention*

Global behaviour patterns such as perfectionism, unassertiveness, low tolerance for stress, or physical addictions may sabotage skill retention. While changing such patterns may be desirable, they are often highly resistant to modification. However, even the awareness of when these patterns are likely to be least disruptive can help managers pinpoint when to implement new skills.

(12) *Schedule time to mix required and desirable activities—the should/want ratio*

Slips are more likely to occur when managers engage in a series of required and tedious activities (shoulds) without any intervening desirable and intrinsically motivating behaviours (wants). Managers can rate each activity of the day along a should/want continuum and plan to include desirable activities at regular intervals. If no desirable activities can be found, questions about the job's appropriateness for the individual can be raised.

#### *RP Strategies to Provide Appropriate Consequences for Behaviour*

(13) *Identify organisational supports for skill retention*

By accurately anticipating their organisation's support for post-training skill retention, managers can reduce the probability of relapse. If trainees do not expect support, they can create their own consequences for their performance. If a heavy workload following training is not eased by the organisation, managers can plan time to implement new skills later.

(14) *Create meaningful rewards and punishments when they do not exist naturally*

Managers need to provide their own rewards and occasional punishments for behaviours unnoticed or unsupported by the

organisation. This is especially important in the early phase of skill retention when subtle improvements in behaviour are crucial to the retention process, but often not dramatic enough to be discriminated by supervisory personnel.

#### *Step V. Predicting the Circumstances of the First Lapse*

After being exposed to the RP strategies and applying them to their own work situation, trainees are asked to describe a scene that would be most likely to sabotage their new learning. This exercise allows trainees to imagine the most likely circumstances for an initial slip to occur. It often results in a *déjà vu* experience when the scenario actually takes place at work. This exercise also provides a smooth transition to the next segment of the RP process, skill practice.

##### **Predict the Circumstances of the First Lapse**

When I want to begin using group decisions on important issues, I will probably schedule our first meeting toward the end of the month when deadlines loom. I will hold the meeting but rush through the agenda saying other priorities take precedence.

I am not sure I can handle some of the disagreements that will emerge from my creative staff. Two staff members will push for their ideas. Instead of being a facilitator to the group, I will push for a decision I favour and demotivate the group.

#### *Step VI. Practise Skills Necessary to Cope with Difficult Situations*

In addition to diagnosing and predicting the likely circumstances of the first slip, practising the skills necessary to cope with the difficult situation is crucial. Managers work in small groups to practise remedies to their potential slips using role plays, feedback, and modelling. This step identifies the concrete affective and behavioural skills that require attention before high risk situations can be overcome.

#### *Step VII. Monitor the Target Behaviour Following Training*

The final step of the RP process introduces self-monitoring procedures as a method of building in a continuous feedback mechanism to compare the original behavioural goals with current progress. Even when these behaviours are counted by the organisation, feedback may occur only at yearly performance reviews. Frequent accounting using a method such as the one shown can be effective in long-term behaviour retention.

### Practise the Necessary Skills

Two parts:

- (a) Reviewing my workload with my boss and selecting a block of time where our meeting can proceed without interruption.
- (b) Joanne Morris is arguing for her strategy. Jeff Billings likes his idea. They both look at me. I need to practise throwing the discussion back to the group, as I am willing to go with their decision.

### Monitor the Target Behaviour

Behaviour retained	=	X					
Behaviour not retained	=	O					
Slip	=	S	M	T	W	T	F
Relapse	=	R	X	X	X	O	X
			O	O	O	O	S

### Using RP Training in a Management Development Programme

RP training is intense, realistic, and emphasises rational problem-solving skills. In place of platitudes and exhortations, where the trainee is the recipient of the key to management success, is an acknowledgement that management training, no matter how well delivered, must include an active trainee role in order to survive as behaviour change at work. This includes diagnosing one's weak spots and creating strategies to handle them.

Presenting the RP model early in a management development programme alerts participants to the importance we shall place on retention and helps them collect behaviour examples to fit the RP strategies. The choice of skill, goal setting, commitment, learning, slip prediction and skill practice steps seems to work best two-thirds of the way into the training programme; that is late enough to include the most important skills but early enough so that trainees are not too saturated to learn another concept, or preoccupied with last minute travel arrangements.

In a four-day training programme, I would recommend the afternoon of the third day. I like to use at least 3-4 hours for RP training although a full day is desirable. The first hour is used for presenting the idea of the model, choosing a skill to retain and establishing a goal. In the second hour I describe the fourteen strategies along with anecdotes and

examples elicited from the trainees. The third and fourth hours include the prediction of the first slip and practice time. Follow-up strategies can range from simple self-monitoring of the target behaviour to mailing in business reply postcards on a weekly basis, so daily performance can be noted by the consultant and mailed back with comments. There has not yet been any empirical research to compare the effects of different timing of RP efforts on the likelihood of skill retention.

There appear to be several high risk situations that threaten the usage of relapse prevention training in management development programmes. The most commonly mentioned is the time required to properly teach self-management skills. Many consultants have been very interested in the RP model, but have been reluctant to add an additional half day to their training designs or to omit other topics. In addition, resistance to the inclusion of RP materials has been based on its attention to errors, slips, and deficits. Where the major criterion of trainer effectiveness is trainee attitude toward the programmes, such concerns are understandable. One might expect more positive evaluations of programmes emphasising positive thinking, than those that focus on realistic problem-solving skills designed to transfer to the workplace. However, when long-term behaviour change is evaluated, serious attention to the relapse problem may outweigh the fleeting positive attitudes toward programmes that do not prepare managers for organisational realities.

Thus far the RP model has been emphasised as a lighthouse for individuals trying to navigate in the organisational “fog” of competing priorities in a busy work environment. In addition to the “micro” usage of the RP model, the information from the RP assessment forms can be used collectively to impact organisational decision making. Data from the self-assessment efforts of trainees can be fed back to training personnel and organisational policy makers to refine training efforts and modify organisational policies and procedures incongruent with training objectives. Those determinants of skill retention failure most frequently endorsed by trainees can be categorised to help organisations decide to either modify the job design, increase the training effort, enhance the payoff, or acknowledge training as a symbolic rather than outcome oriented activity.

## Conclusion

Management development professionals must cope with a Catch-22 situation. They are often required to demonstrate lasting behaviour change on the job, without having any control of the work environment. In the face of limited management support for skill retention, training personnel must consider other options for skill retention that are

trainer/trainee controlled. Self-management relapse prevention skills taught during training and followed up by the trainer may provide an avenue for enhancing skill retention among those trainees motivated to do so. If the relapse rates are as high as the 90 per cent estimated in the literature even a 10 per cent increase in skill retention would double our productivity. While relevant empirical data are still primarily from the clinical area, it appears that training self-management retention skills during the seminar and maintaining follow-up contacts show promise as a relapse prevention technique.

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