
Teaching What Can't Be Taught

THE VALUE OF KNOWING WHAT YOU CANNOT FIX—
AND UNDERSTANDING HOW PEOPLE REALLY CHANGE
AND WHAT THE COMPANY CULTURE HAS TO DO WITH IT

I once was asked to build a training program for a very large company on sexual harassment. (They were against it.) The manager of this project was an attractive young woman whom I got to know as the project progressed. After a while she told me that she was being sexually harassed on a regular basis by her boss and by her boss's boss. It got so bad she was afraid to go into work in the morning. She was certain she would never be promoted as long as she kept rebuffing them.

Of course, it was they who were sponsoring the training program.

The whole idea of building a sexual harassment training program is just a little troublesome, to say the least. We can

build simulated characters with whom a trainee can interact, but what will the issue in the program be? Will we present women to the user and ask them if they would like to make annoying comments or not? Who is likely to harass a cartoon?

What we did do was have trainees play the role of managers who were confronted with situations with which their employees were involved—one sent a pornographic picture to another, for example—and ask them what they should do about it. But this was just an exercise in knowing the law. Trainees needed to know what was considered harassment and what was not. Was a comment on a woman's clothing okay? How about her figure?

The exercise left me cold. I helped design the program, but I doubted it would mean much. My colleague continued to get harassed throughout the software development phase . . . and afterwards.

CAN YOU REALLY TEACH THIS KIND OF THING?

What does it mean to try and teach conceptual change or attitude adjustment? How can you teach this woman's bosses that they were making her life miserable?

We could record women's stories about being harassed and make men listen to them, but if that was all there was to it nothing would ever go bad in the world at all. We would just hear distressing stories and stop what we were doing. It really doesn't work like that. *Some things are just really hard to teach.* Attitude about oneself and the way one treats others are pretty much in there by the time your company has hired its people. Children can change as circumstances alter their perception of things. But for adults it is a whole lot harder.

SO HOW *DO* PEOPLE CHANGE?

When my son was small, I coached his little league team. There was one kid on the team who was a head taller than my son and nearly everybody else. When he stuck his bat out, the ball went quite a ways. He didn't really swing properly. In fact, he hardly swung at all. He was just real strong. No matter what he did the ball went flying. I tried to teach him to hit properly, but he would have none of it. He goofed around, and nevertheless, things went well. He had such great ability that he could do no wrong. I wondered what would happen to him when the competition got tougher. He had nowhere near the desire and intensity that my son had, but he had three times the ability.

Later, I invited my son to bring his friends over for a little backyard tackle football. This kid played fullback. No one could tackle him. He simply bowled everyone over. None of what he did was done properly. Yet again he was uncoachable. He didn't know what he was doing, but he did it effectively. He saw no need to try harder or to learn to do things better.

Again I wondered what would become of him.

Some years later I found out. He was the star on defense on the Wisconsin football team. I watched him cause havoc when he played against Northwestern (where I worked at the time). Soon enough he was in the NFL.

It was hard to track him in the NFL. He certainly wasn't a star, and although he seems to have been in the NFL by 2001 he didn't seem to be playing any longer. Here is what I found on the Internet:

TAREK SALEH

Height: 6–0

Weight: 240

Born: 11/07/1974

College: *Wisconsin [All American]*

NFL Experience: 6

College Notes: *Four-year letterman and three-year starter. Played rush linebacker in a down position most of the time or as defensive end and was used as a pass rusher on almost all passing downs. Had 68 tackles, 20 tackles for a loss, and 14 sacks in 1996. Intense player and great competitor with non-stop work ethic. Plays every down. Quick and tough. Appears to be able to play linebacker in the NFL.*

Acquired: 1997 Draft, 4th Round #26 (#122 overall).

1997, 1998: *Saleh was hoped to replace Kevin Greene at outside linebacker but never lived up to expectations.*

1999: *Saleh was selected sixth by the Cleveland Browns in the 1999 Expansion Draft.*

5/10/99: *Coach Palmer reveals that the Browns have switched Saleh to fullback from linebacker. “He’s 6–2 and 240. I think he’ll go in and hit somebody. We’re still looking for a blocking fullback. Carolina tried to do that with him last year.”*

5/22/99: *Saleh says that he’s happy with the switch from linebacker to fullback, a position he played in high school (and caused Syracuse to recruit him). “I like it a lot. I consider myself a fullback now. I think fullback is something I*

can excel at. Now I'm a big fullback. Before I was a small linebacker."

7/28/99: Saleh plays a role in a nerve-racking event in training camp. Near the end of practice, Saleh slammed into Chris Spielman with enough force to nearly make Spielman unconscious. "It was a great hit," said Coach Palmer. "On a scale of one to 10, it was a 10."

10/15/99: Saleh has done a nice job on special teams this season, including recovering a fumble on a kick-return by Cincinatti in Week 5.

I often think of Tarek when I think about teaching intangibles. I thought he needed to be taught to try hard and I couldn't reach him. Of course he was only 8 or 9 at the time. But someone or something obviously did reach him. No, he didn't become an NFL star, but few do. He did learn to play hard, apparently. In fact, as a small linebacker who made it in the NFL he probably played above his ability.

SO HOW DO PEOPLE LEARN TO WANT TO TRY HARD AND SUCCEED?

What happened that taught Tarek that one thing that seems so unteachable and yet is so vitally important to any organization? Employees who really care to do well at their jobs, who really want to succeed, and who try their hardest—isn't that the real goal in any organization and therefore the real goal in training?

I have no idea.

But I have some guesses that might apply:

1. He found he couldn't get by on size alone and changed his attitude.

2. Some coach was really hard on him and convinced him to start trying.
3. He found someone to compete with who inspired him to beat him.
4. He found a role model to imitate.
5. Some disaster or near disaster occurred that changed his perspective.
6. He simply woke up one day.

Now, I have no idea if any of these things happened, and in fact, it simply doesn't matter for our purposes. *The point is that these are the kinds of things that turn people around.* When people experience attitude shifts, we don't ask them who taught them to have heart or to care or to adopt a different work ethic. We never ask about the teacher or the class they took or the school they went to that caused this kind of fundamental change. We don't ask this because we know that there could have been no such teacher or class or school.

Experiences make us wiser, not people and certainly not classes.

It is events that cause change of this sort. Experiences make us wiser, not people and certainly not classes. To change from an uncoachable backyard fullback into a college All American and NFL success, Tarek had to have had some kind of internal awakening or some external event occur. Certainly a person, in the form of a coach or role model, might have had a great deal to do with it. But we know it just wasn't a class he took on attitude change that changed his attitude.

And what is the lesson here?

THERE IS A LOT OF STUFF YOU SIMPLY CANNOT TEACH

You can, however, help to create an environment where not working your hardest simply does not cut it. We are talking about culture change and not about school or training. The very large company that permitted sexual harassment was led, not surprisingly, by a man who seemed to be constantly, and publicly, involved with various women, and whose divorce was national news. It really didn't matter what sexual harassment course they taught at this company. Everyone understood the prevailing culture. No trainer or training was going to change it.

It always is a good idea to know what you cannot fix and spend energy elsewhere.



JUMP START YOUR TRAINING

Think about Tarek when you think about needed attitude adjustment in your company and remember this:

Not everything is a training issue.

Think about what might have changed Tarek and see how you can make that kind of thing happen in your company. You may not be able to fix the corporate culture, but at least you can avoid wasting time building training that won't matter.

A FEW POINTERS

- Think hard about what can and cannot be taught.
- Find out before you start to build training whether

the company really cares about what you are asked to train employees to do.

- Recognize that you can't train employees to behave in ways that higher ups don't behave.
- Learn to see which problems can actually be addressed by training, and which cannot.
- Figure out how to help create a "learning culture" where those who learn are rewarded and emulated.

And probably most important of all . . .

- Always try to have your training address what the organization really needs, not just what they ask for.