When Dilbert® comics pinpoint a business challenge, it’s officially part of the zeitgeist. In a recent strip, Dilbert said to his boss after a meeting: “All I could get was fake buy-in.” The Boss replied: “That’s the only kind there is.” This strip highlighted the ‘change malaise’ rampant in organizations, where employees have grown weary of change initiatives. Consider these statistics from a 2011 study by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU):

- 77% of organizations had launched more than 2 change initiatives over the prior 12 months, with 73% projecting another 2 or more initiatives over the following 12 months
- 24% of organizations projected 5 or more change initiatives
- 47% increased, or significantly increased, resources for significant change initiatives

Increased resources and time spent on change are fine if they yield results. But that’s the problem: most respondents felt that no greater than 50% of their change initiatives were successful. This is just the latest in a long line of studies with similar findings.

What does this mean to businesses? Consider this quote from The Execution Premium:

> “Strategic initiatives represent the force that accelerates an organizational mass into action, overcoming inertia and resistance to change.”

Strategies designed to boost revenue, reduce costs, and regain market share will shrivel in the face of strong organizational inertia if strategic change initiatives are unable to gain traction.

What is causing the problem?

Although the EIU’s statistics are not surprising, one statistic stands out. When asked, “What is the most important measure in determining whether a change initiative has been successful in your organization?” the top response was not a hard metric like ‘increased profitability’ or ‘customer satisfaction.’

The most important measure in determining the success of a change initiative was “Behavior change in the organization.”

There it is. If you want to achieve strategic change, your number one priority is behavior change. For example, if you need to boost net income by increasing products per household, your salespeople likely need to make two fundamental behavior shifts: increasing collaboration between lines of business, and building customer relationships instead of selling products. By applying a systemic approach to changing these behaviors across thousands of employees, we have seen clients reap significant results—to the tune of tripling sales of complex products, and double-digit spikes in their customer engagement index. But 63% of respondents to our recent survey report a lack of effectiveness at sustaining behavior change. Why does behavior change (and its star-crossed partner, strategic change) fail so often?
Why current solutions fall short

For many corporate learning systems, the distribution of investment does not align with where business impact is derived. Take the results from our May 2012 survey of 223 business professionals\(^4\). We asked survey respondents (mostly Directors of Talent, OD, HR) to estimate their investment allocation across the three main phases of a learning solution (Align/Equip/Sustain). The overwhelming majority of respondents invest their time and energy almost exclusively in formal learning “events” in the middle of a learning process—the “Equip” phase. By contrast, Align (aligning stakeholders in importance of, and their role in, behavior change) and Sustain (applying tools, metrics, and supports to make learning ‘stick’) phases are ignored.

![Investing Time and Resources](chart)

When we then asked respondents to estimate the impact from each of the three phases of a learning system, the results were startlingly different from the investment allocation: Align and Sustain phases were far more impactful than Equip.

![Which phase has the most impact?](chart)

These data support Robert Brinkerhoff’s 40/20/40 rule\(^5\): Aligning and Sustaining make a much greater impact on learning than does simply equipping learners with skills to make a change.
Even more striking are the differences between survey respondents who were “highly effective” at sustaining behavior change, as compared with those who were “somewhat effective” or “not at all effective” (groups we dub ‘leaders’ and ‘laggards’):

One key lesson jumps off the page: **The most effective sustainers of behavior change invest their time and resources where the impact is.**

### The solution

In addition to Robert O Brinkerhoff (*High Impact Learning*), many researchers [Chip Heath and Dan Heath (*Switch*), Daniel H. Pink (*Drive*), and Forum (*Principles of Workplace Learning*)] recommend focusing on and investing in the aligning and sustaining stages of learning, in order to effect behavior changes that drive performance improvement.

Behavior change that drives business change requires more than a training solution. It requires a carefully architected system in which each piece contributes to the whole.

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### To Improve Your Focus on Aligning

Learners are more motivated, engaged, and prepared to change their behaviors if you can answer “yes” to the following:

- Do learners see the connection between business goals, individual performance, and learning opportunities?
- Are learners clear about the reasons for the learning initiative: the learning path and its destination?
- Are you appealing to learners’ rational and emotional sides in your communications?
- Can learners identify opportunities to apply learning to real situations?
- Do you leverage communication and measurement plans to provide feedback and support to learners over time?
- Does the learning initiative have strong, visible support from management?

### To Improve Your Focus on Sustaining

Learning will more likely “stick” and translate to improved performance if you can answer “yes” to the following:

- Have you made it clear to learners and their managers that the learning process continues on after the formal learning event is over?
- Have you put processes, tools, metrics, and supports in place to help learners get on the path to mastery—and stay on it?
- Can learners access examples, practice opportunities, and coaches that can help them in the mid- to long-term?
- Have you put rewards and recognitions in place to help reinforce new behaviors and motivate people to change?
- Have you put appropriate communication and measurement plans in place to provide ongoing feedback on successes, progress, and results?
Before the Learning: Aligning stakeholders and creating a measurement strategy

Sustaining behavior change starts long before there is anything to sustain. First, senior stakeholders must agree on which behaviors will drive execution of their strategy, and how those behaviors will be measured.

The importance of this step cannot be overstated. In our survey data, “Lack of management commitment” is the chief reason why behavior change is not sustained. This is particularly true for our ‘laggards.’

Laggards’ comments provide further insight into this challenge:

- “Executive level politics and turf war”
- “Lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities”
- “Lack of prioritization, too many initiatives to effect change”

With so many strong opinions and agendas, it is critical to get the right people in on one conversation: executive sponsors, business leaders, subject-matter experts, core team members, people playing analytics roles, and people representing marketing, finance, and strategy functions. This meeting, which we call an Impact Workshop, catalyzes the measurement strategy—and commitment.

The Impact Workshop provides the team with a concrete plan of action for measuring behavior change, including key metrics, how they will be tracked and by whom, and how the results will be reported back to stakeholders. The benefits of this approach are many: the measurement and sustainment strategy is grounded in reality, the strategy is viewed as credible, and clear roles and responsibilities helps the team move quickly and efficiently from talk to action. (See Side Bar, Two Examples of Measurement Breakthroughs)

Once there is agreement on the measurement strategy, it is time to execute against the strategy. However, only 38% of organizations are able to demonstrate the impact of behavior change on their business results to even a moderate extent.

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Two examples of Measurement Breakthroughs

- **Financial Services Organization.** This client company had a passion for measuring sales-cycle time. But the Impact Workshop brought to light several things not previously considered: lessons learned in other parts of the organization related to cycle-time challenges, variability of cycle time across products, and practical challenges of tracking cycle time in a customer relationship management (CRM) system. Company leaders ultimately chose to eschew measurement of sales-cycle time in favor of focusing on three specific quantitative metrics for the sales learning initiative: precise items on the company’s customer engagement survey, number of new relationships and the pace at which they progress, and revenue-per-relationship growth over time. Not only could these metrics be linked to sales organization development efforts, but perhaps more important, senior stakeholders could believe in, support and reward them.

- **Financial Services Organization.** This client company’s Learning and Development team realized that to be credible with key stakeholders and organizational culture, they needed tangible evidence of how specific behaviors impacted customer and financial measures. Based on discussions in the Impact Workshop, the team created a customized behavioral survey that quantified the demonstration of these behaviors—such as accessing senior-level customers and executing relationship-planning meetings—and captured a wide range of vivid success stories that showed how employees were adopting the new behaviors and achieving better results. These behavior metrics and stories provided the color and nuance needed to support the tracking of larger metrics over time.
To execute measurement strategy and demonstrate impact on the business, we use Metrics that Matter®. Created by KnowledgeAdvisors, this evaluation tool measures learning at multiple levels:

1. **Level 1**: Monitor Quality—Did I enjoy my learning experience?
2. **Level 2**: Ensuring That Training is Effective—Did I acquire new knowledge and skills?
3. **Level 3**: Improve Application to Job—Will I apply what I learned?
4. **Level 4**: Impact the Right Business Results—What business result will my participation deliver to my organization?

The use of Metrics that Matter enables a scalable, repeatable, global, standardized, and rigorous process for evaluating learning solutions, and connecting learning initiatives to tangible business results.

The leaders in our survey, those organizations most effective at sustaining behavior change, are also much more likely than the laggards to demonstrate business impact. While the laggards may actually achieve business impact, without the proper measurement strategy, they are unable to demonstrate it. Like the proverbial tree falling in the forest with no one to hear it, it’s not clear whether their behavior-change initiatives are making any sound.
During the Learning Event: Choosing the right content and methods to drive behavior change

After gaining alignment on the measurement strategy, it is time to choose the learning methodology and content that will equip people with the skills they need to support the change. This is the “Equip” phase. Forum’s six Principles of Learning* serve as guideposts for designing effective learning programs:

1. Link Learning to Value for the Individual and the Organization
2. Connect Action and Reflection in a Continuous Cycle
3. Address Learners’ Attitudes and Beliefs in Addition to Their Behaviors
4. Provide Learners with a Balance of Challenge and Support
5. Create Opportunities for Participants to Teach as Well as Learn
6. Design and Cultivate Learning Communities Along with Learning Media

These principles apply to traditional classroom experiences and beyond. For many years, we have extended learning into the work through the use of action learning projects followed by facilitated re-connects, thus providing applied learning (challenging action) and dialogue to drive additional learning (supported reflection).

Today, as technology advances, we use additional methods to provide tighter integration with work projects and greater access to relevant skills and tools. For example, in Forum’s virtual instructor led training, the learning experience is enhanced by a series of synchronous (together) and asynchronous (apart) activities that intersect with daily work over a period of two to four weeks. Participants learn about core concepts asynchronously in elearning segments, podcasts, and digital books. They then come together in groups of 15 to 18 to explore these concepts together in facilitated two-hour web conference sessions to practice skills, share lessons learned, and gain additional insight about how the skills and behaviors connect to their work and their organization. Following these synchronous web sessions, participants are immediately back in their work environment with prescribed actions for application, preparation, and additional learning that they complete at their own pace before coming to the next web session. This practice of connecting the learning directly to the work in shorter bursts allows participants to ‘try on’ new skills in the most relevant way possible—as part of their actual work. Participants then come back into the facilitated web conference to share results, learn new skills, and plan for application. This blended approach to learning over time improves application and retention of skills, reduces time away from work, and ensures that the learning remains immediately relevant to the work at hand.

In addition to elearning, podcasts, and web classrooms, social media provides important and powerful tools to advance behavior change. As Jane Hart eloquently puts it in her book, The Social Learning Handbook, “(social media) has turned the concept of learning on its head. It is no longer about waiting to be taught or trained, but about individuals having the power in their own hands to deal with their own learning problems much more quickly and efficiently than before”. The table to the right provides a short list of how social media is used at Forum to move learning closer to the work.

By using the principles of learning to drive the development of extended and blended learning solutions, participants build a solid foundation of skill and knowledge, allowing each individual to adopt the skills and behaviors required to execute the change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media in Learning</th>
<th>What Is It?</th>
<th>When Is It Most Useful?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most Social Media can be accessed via:</td>
<td>Facilitator Micro blogging (yammer)—provide daily tips and advice, share course information and assignments</td>
<td>To improve engagement with the content (classroom or virtual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Social networking sites (Facebook, Ning, Linkedin)</td>
<td>Collaborative workspaces—location where course documents, videos, audio files, and so on are available to participants</td>
<td>To increase collaboration among participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Social Learning Management Systems (Sharepoint, Saba Social, Mzinga)</td>
<td>Wiki pages where learners can add information to expand the knowledge base of the entire group</td>
<td>To share information and experiences around the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation Blogging</td>
<td>Facilitator Blogging—write a course blog to provide focus, interaction on topics, and discussion among readers about the course</td>
<td>To disseminate information that is important to the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messaging—Short text or email messages (SMS messages)</td>
<td>Podcasting—Audio files of varying lengths that can be played on a smart phone, computer, web browser, and so on. Useful when you want to provide participants with portability and convenience of listening to learning resources anytime and anywhere without requiring extensive technical knowledge.</td>
<td>To reflect ongoing participant learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator Blogging</td>
<td>Messaging—Short text or email messages (SMS messages)</td>
<td>To remind people of key concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Blogging</td>
<td>Podcasting—Audio files of varying lengths that can be played on a smart phone, computer, web browser, and so on. Useful when you want to provide participants with portability and convenience of listening to learning resources anytime and anywhere without requiring extensive technical knowledge.</td>
<td>To incent people to take a specific action (read this cool article, don’t forget to let us know …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiki pages where learners can add information to expand the knowledge base of the entire group</td>
<td>Collaborative workspaces—location where course documents, videos, audio files, and so on are available to participants</td>
<td>To share results or stories (look what x did)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiki pages where learners can add information to expand the knowledge base of the entire group</td>
<td>Podcasting—Audio files of varying lengths that can be played on a smart phone, computer, web browser, and so on. Useful when you want to provide participants with portability and convenience of listening to learning resources anytime and anywhere without requiring extensive technical knowledge.</td>
<td>To push key messages to participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: This content is designed to be used as a point of view and is subject to change based on specific project requirements and learning objectives.
After the Learning Event: Making behavior change stick

Effective leaders know that this learning phase—sustain—has the most impact on behavior change. To make the application of learning more consistent and effective, we must pay equal attention to what happens after the learning event as to what happens in the learning event.

In the past, L&D organizations typically focused on the elements of learning over which they had the most control, which meant the formal learning event—its timing, structure, and content. Our survey data, however, show a shift occurring. Not only do our respondents see the sustainment phase as critical, but the vast majority believes that managers or learners, rather than the L&D organization, have the main accountability for sustaining learning and behavior change after the training.

The ‘Leaders’ in our survey have a strong propensity to hold managers accountable. Laggards, meanwhile, expressed concern about accountability in general. “Managers not role modeling, and learner not holding self accountable,” said one survey respondent when asked why change fails, while another was more broad: “Lack of accountability.” When some laggards say “we hold learners accountable,” that could be code for “we don’t hold anyone accountable; we leave it up to the learners to follow through (or not).” (Translation: We drop it in learners’ laps and move on.) As we wrote in Strategic Speed:

... leaders shouldn’t get out of the driver’s seat once they’ve introduced a strategic initiative and gained people’s buy-in: the best leaders, rather, stay in the game and drive execution. Similarly, leaders shouldn’t stay above the fray when it comes to encouraging learning and harnessing experience. If, intending to be “learner-centric,” you put Learning—like a nicely wrapped gift—in the hands of your employees and turn your attention to more pressing things, you’ll likely find that everyone has quickly judged the gift to be attractive but not very practical. They’ll stuff Learning in the back of their closet and turn their attention to more pressing things, too.

Think of your best teachers, coaches, or mentors from the past—those who really helped you grow. Did they leave it up to you to direct your learning? Did they merely “create a space” for learning, give you some tools, and let you decide what you felt like learning that day? Did they let you evaluate your own work? Or, did they make it perfectly clear that a) you could do better, and b) you really could do better—that they believed completely in your ability to reach a higher standard and were committed to helping you get there?

L&D organizations can make it easier for learners to sustain behavior change and easier for managers to hold their people accountable for behavior change. Our Speed to Mastery® approach is a great way to do just that. Speed to Mastery is a web-based application which enables people to apply new skills to real work through an innovative design that uses gaming mechanics like scoring, badges, and recognition to engage people. At face value, the game appears to be an alluring escape from the reality of the workplace, but it is also an ideal environment in which to master real-world skills and tools. This is why gamification has been named a top trend in learning for years to come, and may even be employed by 70% of Global 2000 organizations within two years.

Speed to Mastery supports people in turning learning into behavior change by focusing on intentional, targeted efforts and deliberate practice. Frequent interactions with colleagues, exposure to new challenges, focused goal setting, and opportunities for practice and knowledge sharing all ensure that participants experience continual progress.

Who's Held Accountable for Learning?

The fact that more leaders than laggards hold managers accountable for their employees’ learning is yet more proof that accountability is key to sustainment, and of the importance of managers’ involvement.

While Speed to Mastery is learner-centric, it also assists managers with driving behavior change. Instead of vaguely wondering if they’re supposed to be coaching their team around some new behaviors (behaviors that they may not even feel confident about themselves), managers can simply require that their team all work through the Speed to Mastery process, review their outputs, and hold them accountable for one, measurable thing: Complete the “game” in 60 days.
Sounds great, but in the real world ...

"Okay," you might say, "This all sounds great, but let's face it: in the real world, it's not that easy." And you'd be right. Many organizations are doing more with less—more change initiatives with fewer resources—than ever before. In addition, organizational and marketplace complexity has spiked. Only 20% of employees can easily describe their firm’s strategy, structure, operations, and products/services. This is down from 33% three years ago. In complex environments where people can barely describe what their organization does, it can be an uphill battle to get mindshare and time from learners or their managers in order to make specific changes happen.

Our research suggests, however, that leading L&D organizations are making progress in that battle by distributing energy more evenly across all three phases of learning: align, equip, and sustain.

Together with our clients, we’re discovering new and effective methods of driving behavior change that extend well beyond the formal learning event and create significantly increased accountability, measurability, and results in unique organizational contexts. For example, while Speed to Mastery may work for one organization, other organizations may have better success with facilitated business projects (action learning), Forum executive coaches, or integration of learning assets into the CRM system. To determine which sustainment strategies will work at the three levels in an organization (Systems Level—Organization Drives, Manager Level—Leaders Lead, and Individual Level—Learners Seek), we involve executive sponsors, line leaders, L&D consultants, and HR business partners in sculpting a sustainment approach best suited for the organization’s unique context. This helps determine the sustainment actions that would have the organizational fit, management support, and learner impact.

To find out more about how Forum can help your organization optimize behavior change for business impact, visit us at www.forum.com.

Endnotes
1. Leaders of Change: Companies prepare for a Stronger Future. Economist Intelligence Unit, 2011
4. Ibid
9. The Complexity Challenge: How Businesses are Bearing Up, Economist Intelligence Unit. 2011

Forum is a recognized global leader in linking learning to strategic business objectives. Our learning solutions help organizations effectively execute their business strategies by focusing on their most important asset: their people. We provide clients with practical and research-based advice and tailored programs that mobilize employees, accelerate business-initiative implementation, and improve agility. Forum’s 40-year legacy as a pioneer and thought leader continues with the release of our latest book, Strategic Speed (Harvard Business Press).

For more information, visit www.forum.com.

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