
PERSPECTIVES

Academic Attrition in Training Programs: Friend or Foe?

By

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As a retired Department of Air Force civilian who was employed at the Defense Language Institute English Language Center (DLIELC), the ideas expressed below are those of the author and do not represent the position of the Air Force or DLIELC. They are based on almost forty years of experience as an instructor and manager in the training field.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to discuss the dynamics of academic attrition in training programs (TPs). Attrition for non-academic reasons such as health or discipline is excluded from this discussion. The primary target audience for this article is TP managers, field managers who receive the TP output, and anyone who has ever attended a TP.

Virtually every corporate and military TP has course standards, some well defined, others not so well defined. Theoretically, students meet the standards or they are eliminated from the course. As we know, much to the chagrin of the trainers and the field managers receiving the graduates, attrition does not always happen according to this script. Exceptions are made; waivers are granted. Some students who do not fully meet the standards always seem to ooze into the field.

The two most common reasons for exceptions are pressure from the top to keep the rate of attrition (ROA) down and an immediate need for graduates in the field. Forced to pass on students who do not meet the standards, course managers must be inventive. Perhaps the most common stratagem for justifying the graduation of unqualified students is to resort to, what I call, the whole person concept. The theory is that, even though students do not meet course standards, they have some redeeming characteristics that will compensate for their demonstrated lack of technical skill. Course managers search student academic records to mine the following phrases:

- Student consistently displayed an excellent attitude;
- Student completed all assignments;
- Student was very cooperative with his instructors; and
- Student was highly motivated.

These phrases become the justification for shipping technically lackluster graduates to the field. In applying the whole person concept, the question that always begs to be asked is whether good character can compensate for lack of technical skill.

Sometimes applying the whole person concept may actually work to the benefit of the organization. The organization may gain a productive employee who, had the course standards not been waived, would have been lost. However, I submit that, more often than not, the application of the whole person concept is a shortsighted prescription for postponing failure. Personally, I hope the whole person concept is applied only in those instances in which the lack of technical skills can not lead to a disaster. I would prefer that the surgeon wielding the scalpel on me be, not just a good guy, but highly skilled. Applying the whole person concept most frequently results in deferred attrition. That is, attrition that should have taken place in training takes place in the field, where the graduate exhibits his ineptitude. One would think that all organizations everywhere would realize that deferring attrition to the field is an expensive, inefficient alternative to effecting attrition in the

TP. Field managers, both military and corporate, bemoan the practice of passing onto the field inept employees of good character.

There is a price to be paid for passing on inept employees to the field. Employees who do not measure up in the field become parasites, who consume more than they produce. They demand continuous attention from their supervisors and peers and, because of their ineptitude, degrade the cohesiveness and morale of their working units. One alarming phenomenon is that some inept employees, having beaten the system in the TP, develop successful strategies for surviving in the field. Somehow, these employees, whose job performance is marginal at best, manage to beat the system and remain employed despite the fact that everyone knows that their continued employment is detrimental to the organization. They develop immunity to being fired. As I once said about an egregiously inept colleague who managed not only to survive, but to thrive year after year,

To be that stupid and keep your job, you have to be smart.

Egalitarianism versus Attrition

Typically, and especially in our culture, a TP with a high ROA is considered problematic and a TP with a very low ROA is considered a success. I theorize that this paradigm is partially rooted in the dogma of egalitarianism that pervades the United States educational establishment. The basic tenet of this dogma is that all men are literally created equal. Differences in individual achievement, which most of us believe at least partially reflect differences in intellect and talent, are attributed by the egalitarians solely to differences in opportunity. To ascribe distinctive achievement to individual talent is considered elitist. Elitism is the cardinal sin because it is the supreme affront to egalitarian orthodoxy.

Of course, one would have to have blinders on not to realize that, in our society, some individuals have greater opportunity than others. Differences in opportunity certainly do confer advantages to some over others. Nevertheless, innate ability is a major factor in an individual's ability to achieve. We can all recount anecdotes of individuals of humble origin who achieved great success in life. The brutal fact is that innate ability opens doors to some and closes doors to others. Yet, as had been pointed out, innate ability, i.e., elitism is anathema to the egalitarian gospel.

One of the corollaries of egalitarianism is that, given the opportunity to compete on an equal footing, anyone who tries hard enough can aspire to any profession. Recently, politicians of both parties have been advocating universal college education. The idea seems to be that, if going to college is good for anyone, then it is good for everyone. Having had experience working with recent college graduates who are borderline illiterate and innumerate, I can not imagine how much lower standards will have to sink to accommodate everybody. We have already reached the point that a master's degree is not a guarantee of literacy. One of my favorite rejoinders came from an earnest young new employee who had written comments on the academic record of a student. They were written in some kind of Pidgin, a form of English devoid of standard grammar and syntax. I explained to the woman that she had a literacy problem and we were going to have to let her go. She huffily replied, "I majored in education, not literacy." Well, shut my mouth!

Individuals who try hard and still do not succeed achieve victim status, a status that, among the egalitarians, is akin to sainthood. By definition, in egalitarian orthodoxy, lack of success is attributable to some nefarious external influence, never to a lack of innate ability. Ergo, attrition is inherently unfair and an intolerable form of elitism.

If we accept egalitarianism at face value, we can conclude, all other things being equal, individuals with an IQ of 70 have the same chance of being a brain surgeon as individuals with an IQ of 149. This is a situation in which myth clashes with reality and myth, in the eyes of most observers, loses. Fortunately, I do not believe you will find a single brain surgeon with an IQ of 70. Being a brain surgeon, quite appropriately, requires lots of brain cells. Brain surgeons are a rather and here comes that really dirty word in the egalitarian lexicon, elite group.

With respect to TPs, our cultural baggage leads us to believe that, when a TP eliminates a student from training, it is the TP, not the student that is at fault. A TP with very low ROA is commonly regarded as a triumph and one with very high ROA is regarded as in need of repair. Training managers are lauded for a low ROA, but very rarely get rewarded for a high ROA. A training manager who boasted to his boss that he tripled the ROA would ipso facto be considered a lunatic. In fact, there are circumstances in which tripling the ROA would be most salubrious for a TP. The fact is that a low ROA frequently indicates that there are costly inefficiencies. Attrition, when properly understood and applied, is often a positive phenomenon that brings great benefits to the organization.

Because in our society a training program with a low ROA is generally, and frequently erroneously, regarded as a triumph, I am going to focus on the possible ill effects of a low ROA and on a systematic approach to deliberately raise the ROA for the benefit of the organization. I will not attempt to address those problems that may be associated with a high ROA.

Course Standards

Before continuing our discussion of ROA, it is necessary to briefly discuss the concept of course standards. In the ideal world, all other things being equal, attrition is a function of course standards. Students meeting course standards graduate; students not meeting them are eliminated from training. Course standards, in turn, given equal quality of instruction, are a function of three variables:

- Volume of course content (V),
- Difficulty of course content (D), and
- Time (T) allotted to learn the content.

Manipulating these variables can either increase or decrease the ROA. It can readily be seen that, all other things being equal, increasing the V and/or D while holding the T constant, would tend to increase the ROA. Conversely, reducing the T while holding the V and/or D constant would also tend to increase the ROA.

Low ROA

All other things being equal, a very low ROA most frequently indicates one of the following situations:

- Standards are too low;
- Standards are not being enforced;
- The V is too small;
- The D is too low;
- The T is excessive; or
- A combination of some or all of the above

Note that none of the variables accounting for very low ROA is a positive phenomenon. Very few training managers would brag to their bosses that the course was not sufficiently rigorous, there was too little course content, too little was taught in too much time, or course standards were not being enforced. The logical conundrum is that, despite the negative factors that account for a very low ROA, a very low ROA is generally regarded as a positive phenomenon. Go figure.

The astute reader is chafing to tell me that I left out one positive variable that frequently accounts for very low ROA. What about the situation in which there is, what I call, an ideal student population? That is, all of the students are hand-picked and exceptionally bright. Such an idyllic situation would justify a very low ROA, would not it? In response, I would say that it could indeed, but I submit that, even with an ideal student population, a very low ROA is often not a positive phenomenon. It is frequently the case that a manipulation of the C, D and T variables yields benefits to the organization that outweigh the ensuing increase in ROA. Let us take the hypothetical case of an ideal student population that has an ROA of zero. Let us assume that the T is twenty weeks. Now let us manipulate the variables. What if we were to cut the T to fifteen weeks with an ensuing attrition rate of 10 percent? Or, what if we were, in consultation with field managers, to increase the D and/or V with an

ensuing attrition rate of 10 percent? In this hypothetical case, I suspect that a cost-benefits analysis might show that the reduction of five weeks of training time might more than offset the loss of 10 percent of the student population. I suspect that a cost-benefits analysis would also show that the overall higher skill level of the graduates resulting from an increase in the D and/or V would more than offset the 10 percent loss. Manipulation of the T, D, and V variables can bring great benefits to both the TP and the field activity that receives the graduates.

To a trained nose, a very low ROA in TPs, especially those not blessed with an ideal student population, smells suspect. A very low ROA should be a loud wake-up call for training managers to examine the health of their TPs. It signals that it is probably time to manipulate the T, V, and D variables to achieve results that best serve the interests of the organization. A manipulation of these variables can produce more highly skilled graduates by eliminating the inefficiencies inherent in an ailing TP afflicted with a very low ROA. Alternatively, the manipulation of variables can produce graduates with the same skills in less time. At the expense of a slightly elevated ROA, the typical graduate can finish the course in less time with greater skills. The more one constricts the T and raises the V and D, the greater the ROA and the more elite the group of graduates. Of course, there eventually comes an ROA that renders elitism cost-ineffective. Just how much elitism is desirable is hypothetically a question of cost-effectiveness as well as organizational priorities. In reality, despite the gripes of training and field managers, what constitutes an acceptable ROA is sometimes more a question of organizational politics than of cost-effectiveness.

Lack of Enforcement of Standards

Very frequently there is a very simple explanation for a very low ROA: lack of enforcement of standards. The lack of enforcement is a pernicious phenomenon that significantly degrades not only the TP, but also organizational credibility. Listed below are some of the negative effects caused by a lack of enforcement of standards:

- Students failing to meet standards tend to pollute the learning environment, they envy their more gifted peers and try to drag them down to their level.
- The TP's seriousness of purpose is called into question. When students and instructors see that standards are not enforced, they become cynical and cynicism is the antithesis of morale.
- Slow learners tend to disproportionately soak up instructor time; time that would be more effectively and efficiently devoted to more able students.
- Unqualified graduates are passed on to the field, where they absorb the time of their supervisors and peers out of all proportion to their value to the organization. They become a disruptive nuisance, lowering the esprit de corps of their more productive colleagues. Fortunately, many of these individuals are, albeit belatedly, eliminated in the field. Unfortunately, some of them develop sophisticated coping skills and manage, to the detriment of the organization, to survive until retirement.
- Retention of students failing to meet standards is toxic to instructors. Having to devote disproportionate time and effort to non-learners drains the enthusiasm of the instructors, rendering them less effective, even for the learners.

Summary

In summary, although our culture tends to regard a training program with a low rate of attrition as a success, the fact is that a low ROA often indicates that the TP is inefficient. Manipulating the time, volume, and difficulty can establish a balance between the ROA and higher standards that best serves the interests of the organization. A certain degree of elitism and the concomitant attrition are necessary to ensure training programs function efficiently, providing qualified graduates for the field.

About the Author

Thomas Molloy is retired DAFC. He spent almost thirty-eight years at the Defense Language Institute English Language Center. During his tenure, he served as Chief of the General English

Branch, Chief of the Evaluation Division, Chief of the Institutional Relations and Chief of the Programs Division. He spent some twenty years overseas as an English Language Training instructor, advisor, or manager. In addition, he did English Language Training consulting work in twenty countries and for seven major corporations. He is fluent in Turkish.