



# Challenging the low-risk method of training

By Kevin Himmel and Peggy K. Steele

## Does this situation sound familiar?

*You leave your weekly operations meeting frustrated, feeling that once again, the training and human resources team is not considered a valued partner in the corporation. In fact, the Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing actually said, "Our sales training is not effective. We're not getting immediate results with new hires or advanced sales training, and we can't afford to have our sales people offline for something that is just mediocre!"*

*This isn't the first time your sales team has identified lack of effective training as an issue. They can be a difficult and demanding group to please, but they are also the ones who produce results on a regular basis.*

*Your team has been tasked with putting into place a challenging but engaging system for training that measures results that executives and operations managers will respect. Where do you start?*

The scenario is all too typical. Every day, training professionals face external challenges about the effectiveness of their training initiatives, and must try to balance providing measurable performance results with learning solutions that create lasting impacts. This is often especially true in the area of internal sales training.

To become valued partners within an organization,

training teams must employ application-based interventions, which often require moving beyond low-risk methods of training.

## MAKE IT REAL-WORLD

While appropriate for knowledge transfer and building basic skills, the traditional low-risk training methods – such as lectures, discussions, and other classroom related activities – don't engage participants on an emotional level.

On the other hand, moderate- to high-risk training, usually simulation based and set up to model reality, is typically considered for high-risk occupations like pilots,

medical workers, emergency first responders, and the military. These simulations have increased risk and are practiced in an environment that is as close to the real world as possible. Pilot trainees can "crash" planes, surgeons make medical mistakes, first responders have seconds to make life saving decisions, and Special Forces troops can be "killed." The training is effective; these learners never forget the hands-on lessons they learn. But classroom/corporate training cannot replicate this type of simulated danger. Or can it?

Creating simulations that mimic a learner's real world job, even if that job is not life-or-death, provides opportunities for things to happen the way they would in the workplace. In a simulated business world, for example, managers can make mistakes—sometimes

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Meaning, Accountability, Both!

serious ones that end up in litigation or as major career derailers; customer service representatives can create dissatisfied customers by failing to provide timely service; and salespeople lose sales, are demoted, and can even be fired.

In a custom sales simulation we recently designed, participants not only observed particular sales skills taught during the training, but they practiced them immediately by calling on “customers” and presenting solutions to key decision makers. Teams competed against each other, and at the conclusion of the program, they either won or lost the customer’s business. This process engaged participants mentally and emotionally, and the learning translated to on-the-job behavior change.

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## TELL A STORY

In Annette Simmons’ *The Story Factor*, she states, “A good story simplifies our world into something that we feel like we can understand.... A story weaves detail, character, and events into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.”

Simulations begin with stories based on real-world events. Like a good story, the simulation plot unfolds throughout the training, with new twists and turns added periodically to keep things interesting.

One way to design a “hook” for simulation-based training is to use elements of storytelling. Using three-dimensional, realistic-sounding situations lets participants begin with a context. Participants remain engaged and internalize the unique meaning they attach to the story.

Participants are moved beyond low-risk training when they engage with what is happening around them. During a simulation-based training, teams often interact to decide on and build solutions or to make recommendations. These interactions often create

sub-plots to the story and help to reinforce the real-world challenges of teamwork.

## CREATE RISKIER RESULTS

From an early age, we were taught to want to win, and we learned that competition creates heightened risks and results. Most children, wherever they grew up, lined up at some point, and someone shouted, “Ready? Set? GO!” As they sprinted to the finish line,

many discovered that they ran faster when they had someone to beat. Children left the race knowing that they either had to practice more before the next race, or they earned “bragging rights” as the fastest kid on the block.

Competition and risk built into training helps prepare participants for the environment they are likely to see in their day-to-day jobs. The goal of simulating with elevated risk is for participants to transfer their experiences, learning, and behaviors back to their jobs.

**Effective real-world business simulations challenge the traditional corporate instructional design mantra of providing a totally low-risk environment.**

Simulations can build a moderate or high emotional risk without high-risk consequences by using strategies such as:

- Creating a real-world scenario
- Intensifying peer-to-peer interaction
- Encouraging team decision making
- Utilizing day-to-day and cumulative competition
- Sharing performance results
- Holding individuals and teams accountable
- Awarding business to only the top performers

Effective real-world business simulations challenge the traditional corporate instructional design mantra of providing a totally low-risk environment. On one hand, the simulations are low-risk because participants don’t *actually* lose the sale or the job. However, the feelings evoked from an experience with heightened emotional risk stick with participants long after the training ends.

## DON'T OVER ENGINEER IT!

Whether face-to-face, on-line, or in a blended combination, the key to simulations is the human element. Powerful simulations are not over-engineered. They allow flexibility by leaving competition, human dynamics, and real-world scenarios intact to drive final outcomes.

I (Kevin) recently led an instructional design team that created a custom sales simulation for the training and development industry. After it was created, I was asked to participate in the pilot as a member of one of two sales teams. I thought about how lucky my team was to have the designer on board, and how our team would be at such an advantage because of it. My ego and confidence were quickly deflated after the first round of customer interviews, though, when I discovered that although I could recite the process of the simulation and the design elements, I could not influence or predict the human dynamic. Our team's interactions with the customers and individual performances provided engagement and risk that was unpredictable to even the designer of the simulation. The human dynamic keeps simulations real and differentiates them from becoming games.

While you don't want to over-engineer a simulation, it's critical to arrange for ample time for reflection and to provide facilitation in the learning process. Tight, efficient simulation design provides for guided lessons and applications to the real world. This is the most important part of the learning experience. Without it, simulations are at best interesting, and at worst, out of touch with the business needs. Learning—and resulting performance changes—come from guided reflection and accountability engineered into the reinforcement, so that in the next stage of training, skills just learned must be used correctly, whether on-

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the-job or in a more advanced practice simulation.

## WHEN TO USE SIMULATIONS

Simulations are not appropriate for all types of learning. It would be overkill to design a simulation that teaches new employees the skill of punching in and out on a time clock...

Face to face simulations are appropriate when the risk is worth the reward. The risks are the gamble involved. For example, a simulation may include a variety of real world risk affecting things like quality, cost, time, people out of the field, etc. Rewards are the immediate, visible application of skills and the recognition that going forward with this type of action or behavior is desired. For example, in sales it may be the importance of identifying the decision making process in advance of proposing, or it may be adding a step to the initial discovery with the client to check their assumptions. While these can be taught in traditional training, doing or not doing these tasks in the simulation will often make the difference between losing the business or gaining it. Consider using simulations for training when the consequences of not following certain processes, procedures or practices are severe, or where skills must be learned and applied immediately on the job.

On-line simulations are effective when technology can enhance the learning and decision making process, while recreating the level of emotional involvement necessary to get the feel of real-world consequences. The emotional involvement may include things like wanting to win and wanting to find out as much as possible about the competition. Participants' engagement levels are another key to determining emotional involvement. How engaging is the simulation? Are participants engaged enough to go beyond the minimum requirements? We have seen participants work as teams and stay up all night before a final presentation to help create an edge and put

their best foot forward...much like the real world.

Simulations provide the benefits of sound instructional design in creative ways that let participants take control of their own learning. Learners begin to remove negative connotations about a “training event” and become engaged at a higher level when they realize what’s in it for them.

Consider this new ending to the situation from the beginning of the article:

**COO:** *“Our next agenda item is the progress on three key sales metrics. What trends are we seeing in customer spending, new product buy, and proposal close rates?”*

**Senior VP, Sales and Marketing:** *“All three have gone up in the past two months, and month three results look like we have increased results again in all three areas. I think we’re on to something. We started the new sales training program, but we also rolled out a new marketing campaign three weeks ago.”*

**You:** *“The sales training has been getting great feedback from both sales managers and national account executives. They say it is really hitting the mark.”*

**COO:** *“But can it demonstrate an impact on these three key sales metrics from the training?”*

**You:** *“Yes, it can. The training is conducted in teams of account executives, and they are all passing the knowledge and skills tests at the end of the program. We’re also tracking the post-training rate of business closed compared to groups that haven’t taken the sales training. The groups who have gone through the training are clearly getting results, but the groups that are waiting for the training are flat.”*

**Senior VP, Sales and Marketing:** *“It looks like we have only trained twenty percent of the field. How soon can we get everyone through the training?”*

**COO:** *“This data shows the impact on sales, so let’s get everyone up to speed as soon as possible. Be sure we track the results and do what is necessary for the sales managers to support the effort. We can’t afford to waste more time.”*

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