"The first step on the road to high performance begins with a choice."

Great Systems Training Work System Improvement Tips

By **Kevin McManus**, Chief Excellence Officer, **Great Systems**

Are there enough practice fields in your training work system?

I first became aware of how practice fields are needed to drive true learning when I read **Peter Senge**'s book *The Fifth Discipline* back in the early 1990s. The follow-up book, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, expanded further on this concept.

The following thoughts on the need to design practice time into our training and learning work system are taken from the first book. They apply to learning, training, and teams who ideally strive to learn more from each other.

"In most business team environments, people use time to make decisions about specific situations, which are often debated and decided under great time pressure, with each decision being final as soon as it is made. There is no experimentation with options. Worse still, there is little opportunity to form reasoned assessments of the wisdom of different decisions."

In our time-sensitive world, how can we take the time to practice? Practice fields come in two forms - actual skill practice and computer simulations. If you want a supervisor to get better at conflict resolution, then they need to do more than read a list of tips on the topic.

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Instead, they need several practice repetitions, with quality feedback being part of each rep, to make real learning happen. Practice excellence to be excellent!

Does your training and learning work system waste learning time?

I would like you to take a couple of minutes to reflect on three questions. First, how many hours of training do you think takes place in the work world each day? Second, what is the total cost of that training?

Third, if we tested each trainee on the content that they covered two weeks ago today, how much of that material would they remember? In other words, what did they really learn?

I have strong opinions when it comes to training effectiveness. In general, they are not positive ones. Unfortunately, my opinions are also based largely on personal experience and observation.

Over the last 20 years, I have facilitated more than 10,000 classroom hours. I feel that the research exists, albeit qualitative, to justify my feelings. I think most of the training that occurs each day at work is a waste of time! We spend the time, but the right stuff does not get into long term memory. All too often, learning does not occur!!

A review of my list of training work system weaknesses should help support why I feel this way. However, I am also aware of what I have forgotten.

I admit a lack of use relative to certain skills others taught me over the years. Some of the concepts and skills were not relevant. Some of the content I did not understand.

Most of it, I forgot. Eventually, as I spent more time as a trainer myself, I began to find better ways to design training work systems to help promote skill retention and application.
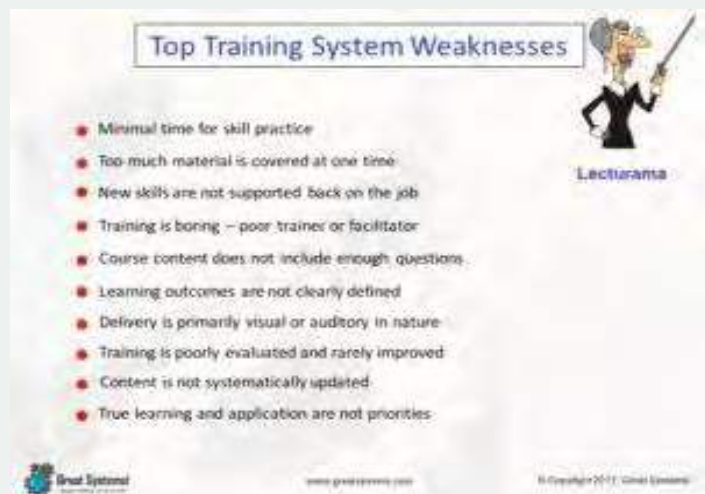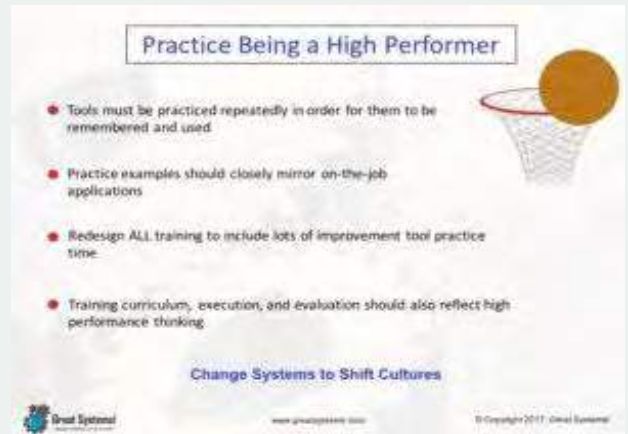
Why we need practice if we want to drive true learning

Exploring the world of sports from a systems perspective during my life the past helps me better understand the need for practice when it comes to true, effective learning. I learned at a young age that one must practice in sports if they wanted to get better.

However, I had not yet realized a key concept. Most of the skills we expect managers and supervisors to know and use in a high-performance workplace (or in most workplaces for that matter) require a lot of practice IF we expect people to become proficient at - really learn - those skills!

Think about it. How much practice time do you get to learn new skills on the job? Have you been getting enough practice to really become good at the key skills you are expected to know? How much can you really learn when you try to practice while the game is going on?

As for the daily cost of training ... I stopped thinking a lot about it once I saw that we were easily wasting a million dollars a day. For example, 100 managers at a $35 hourly wage rate receiving 8 hours of training at 50 different locations gives you a daily cost of $1.4 million! I sure hope that those 5,000 managers use what they spent that money for.

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A more effective approach to training and learning work system design

There was a point in time where I too as a trainer relied mainly on lecture to deliver the material I was supposed to teach to others. I did not realize that the content delivery approach one uses makes that much difference!

I had two eye opening events occur back in the day that truly shifted my own paradigms about how one should deliver training if a company expects to its people understand, retain, and apply key concepts and skills.

The first experience involved teaching a two-day statistical process control (SPC) class to my food plant supervisors. The training seemed to go well enough. Later, I learned that part of the trainees' in-class cooperation had to do with the fact that many of them had only a third-grade level of math literacy. For example, they struggled to understand even the meaning and use of all of those decimal points!

Why did I teach the course this way? Because that is the main way that others had taught me since I entered the world of formal education at the age of five. From the short-term perspective, it is much less painful to teach in a manner we are personally familiar with than it is to learn to teach differently. Who cares if anyone remembers or uses anything or not, right?

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The Baldrige Examiner training experience

My second paradigm-shifting event occurred when I went to my first **National Baldrige Examiner** training session. As this was being put on by a group associated with the Federal government, I assumed that it was going to be two plus days of boring lecture.

Instead, I took part in a highly interactive set of exercises that really did encourage learning. That experience really shifted my paradigms about student engagement and training effectiveness.

The first experience taught to never assume anything when one prepares to deliver a training class. The second event showed me how there are highly effective alternatives to lecture out there if one truly wants effective learning to occur.

Since that point in time, I have modified all of my training packages to be exercise focused. Try to build at least 50% practice time into your learning event lesson plans. You'll like the effective concept comprehension and task performance results you'll see!!

Would you like to create an effective training and learning work system?

Over the past forty years, I have helped many different companies - both small and large – design, install, and use effective training and learning work systems.

Such experiences help me discover value added, simple ways to set up training curriculums, personal development plans, certification programs, and effectiveness measures to support a high-performance workplace.

Excessive use of lecture and computer-based training are two key power restrictors found in most training and learning work systems. I hope this content helps you minimize both barriers.

Most importantly, they will help you move forward more rapidly towards higher levels of learning and performance. Keep improving!

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About the author

As Chief Excellence Officer of Great Systems LLC, Kevin McManus provides virtual coaching and content to help people use proven best practices to enhance and optimize their daily work systems.

Over forty years of work experience in roles such as Industrial Engineer, Training Manager, Production Manager, Plant Manager, and Director of Quality give Kevin a 'real life work' perspective relative to daily work process optimization, work team engagement and empowerment, and sustainable operational excellence.

As a contract trainer for the TapRooT® root cause analysis process, Kevin has taught over 450 courses and further enhanced his ability to help leaders proactively minimize risk, reduce errors, and improve reliability. Kevin holds an undergraduate degree in Industrial Engineering and an MBA. He served as a national Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Award Examiner for twenty years, including a three-year term on the national Judge's Panel.

Kevin has authored the monthly performance improvement column for Industrial and Systems Engineer magazine for over 20 years, is an Institute of Industrial and Systems Engineering Fellow and has been a member of IISE for over forty years. His newest book, "Different Company – How the Best Build Great Organizations", will be published in late 2025."

If you would like more information about the improvement tools and systems I have to offer, please send me an e-mail at **kevin@greatsystems.com.**

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- 12 team exercises that can be used to begin applying each concept as it is learned

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- 128 pages of ideas and examples to help you make your existing measurement systems more meaningful
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- 14 team exercises to help you create work systems that support and encourage a high performance work culture

kevin@greatsystems.com
206.226.8913

www.greatsystems.com

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