

# REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



## How Mandatory Training Can Feel Less 'Mandatory'

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*Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

*Mandatory training, two words that strike fear or revulsion among modern day workers. Of course, there are legitimate reasons to do it. These events often serve important legal requirements, instill and reinforce certain organizational values, inform about company policies and procedures not typically used in daily routines or to correct known problems. Now, too much mandatory training can take away time and energy from the core mission of the organization. But what's worth examining is the culture surrounding this kind of training, where members view it as drudgery or painful due to the poor quality and execution and the sense that the organization is merely checking a block. Could things be better?*

*My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.*

Let me first start by talking about what I mean by mandatory training, because it is kind of a catch-all term and there is a lot of other terms out there probably that describe it. It's a sort of a training or some sort of leader development activity that's required of everyone in an organization or maybe some particular designated subset. And this training is based on some sort of a legal or a policy requirement as a condition of membership. So, for example, if you have diversity and inclusion training, everybody might be required to take some sort of diversity and inclusion training on an annual basis. And the expectation is, is that not only do they attend the training, but they incorporate it into their their workspace.

Information technology is another example, in particular, information assurance, which would be the security requirements for properly using the information technology equipment provided policies such as what not to do on the computers, illegal or improper activities, the punishments and sanction thereof, how to properly protect the companies or the organizations critical information. All of those things constitute rules, policies, procedures, what's whatever that people have to know. And it can include things like if they see something that's out of compliance, where did they report it to? Who do they turn to to learn more information if they are unclear about the policy? All of that tends to be included in these modules. And as I said in the in the preface here, there are some perfectly legitimate reasons to to do this.

So part of the challenge is, you know, when and how often and how much such training is really necessary. The the tendency is to have certain timings of the requirements. In the organization where I work at, there is a tendency to rely on annual refresher training. So, for example, if you join the organization, then you have all of this training that you have to do the first time upon entry and

then you have to refresh every single year, for example, I would have to retake or do an update training on information security requirements in order to stay or maintain my access to, say, a government computer system. There's annual refresher trainings on things ranging from how to protect yourself when you're on official travel to to diversity, inclusion to equal opportunity, human resource management, various various things in that regard. I mean, it's a wide range of things. So you have annual requirements. And then, as I said, onboarding to need to do a whole bunch of onboarding training in order to ensure that all of the incoming personnel have an understanding of the policies that are going to be in effect during their time in the organization. So certainly this is the sort of thing that an organization does need to do as sort of part of its housekeeping.

It's got to have a system by which the values associated with the things that I've talked about are inculcated and sustained in the organization, because as you have turnover -- you know, people changing -- or, as you know, the organization comes under stress. Those are times when perhaps the organization may be at increased risk of of bad things happening. And so you've got to make sure that everybody is on board with what the expectations are, what the proper procedures are, etc. And certainly this kind of training can be very effective when used immediately. If you have an organization that comes out of crisis, then one of the things that you would want to do is to ensure that everybody understands what it took to get out of the crisis and what it takes to prevent a crisis from recurring, which is, for example, with the military and sexual harassment and sexual assault. That's an example of the sort of thing that you would see increased training to ensure that past crises don't recur.

Now, the typical problem that people have with mandatory training, I don't always see it directed more at the ends as so much as the ways and the means, the ways in which mandatory training is conducted and managed and the means available to use it, which tends to get which gets into the question of how much is enough and how much does it potentially compete for limited energy and time in the organization.

Now, let me run you through some things you've probably seen (I definitely have) and this is the sort of mandatory training that I think enhances that sense of dread, the one is that it is delivered by computer and the program itself is literally just take a PowerPoint slides or PowerPoint style slides with the word bullets on it, nothing else. And then there's an audio track in which the narrator literally reads the slide to you. Moreover, there's a next button that allows you to go ahead onto the next slide, but it doesn't activate until the entire slide has been read. So you can't you can't advance faster than the narration. So you have basically an example of absolute captive audience, passive learning where you're trying to inculcate some sort of an important organizational value. And you can imagine that if you have a whole series of modules that are like this, that it really can become mind numbing. As a matter of fact, I know of organizations that, in fact have a whole bank or a whole suite of these exact type of mandatory training modules in which members are required to view a certain number of hours worth on an annual basis. And it is literally exactly that -- Just reading off of PowerPoint slides, very much a check the block type of a form.

Well, it gets kind of funny is that sometimes, you know, you try to dress it up, too. So I've seen mandatory training programs in which they tried to introduce gaming or other sorts of gimmicks to

try to spice things up, to make it feel like you're not just being dictated to. But ultimately, you know, the content is still kind of the same. But if you've done the the gimmicky version, the first time it might be might be a little bit new and interesting. By the time you've done it the tenth time after enough years, then it gets rather annoying.

And which kind of gets to another thing that I think is a concern with mandatory training is a failure to update it on an annual basis. So literally, the refresher training is exactly the same material delivered exactly over and over. Or maybe there's such minimal change. You know, you don't really notice that there's been much change. And then there's the the matter of, say, checks on learning or validation or assessment, which tend to be quizzes of a multiple-choice variety in which and these are especially bad in the ones where the whole training is built on reading slides to you, where the questions are verbatim off the slide, there's very little variation. And almost assuredly if the if one of the options is an all of the above, chances are all of the above is going to be the answer. So those sorts of things, you know, that that is the sort of thing that people complain about because it just doesn't seem to add very much value.

So let's talk about this. [I]f there's something that has such an important purpose, we seem to resort to rather cheap methods of doing it. And moreover, they tend to be additive every single time that there's a new requirement. We're not taking a look at the whole suite to say, OK, what's really important, it's this lets us add more and more and more and more and more. By the time you're done, you end up in a situation where the the literal numbers of hours in the day could be very well consumed with doing this sort of training and not actually performing the purpose or mission of the organization. So if you do consider the purpose as being honorable and noble and necessary, then what are we doing wrong? First, my immediate sense is that we are sort of taking the human element out. And when I say the human element, I mean a lot of the things that we do put into mandatory training may ordinarily be the sort of things that we might look to first line supervisors or leaders like, let's say, within the military setting the non-commissioned officers, sergeants. Time is a metaphor that I remember from my time in the service where, you know, there were times in which the sorts of value inculcation, the sorts of, you know, legal requirements were left to non-commissioned officers to ensure that their individual soldiers in their charge were up to speed on that sort of thing. You know, certainly in the days when mandatory training was becoming more and more centralized, one of the questions was kind of like, well, is this a signal that we're not trusting the supervisors to be able to handle or present this sort of an information?

It turns out that not very long ago, the United States Army did, in fact, take steps to try to say, "All right, we are requiring too much. Everything is important, but it is too much and we need to get to the point of delegating those sorts of responsibilities back to local commanders, non-commissioned officers to do you know, to trust them and to make sure that the that their charges have the right information." So one of the things that I think is important is that there be an open sense of that. We're going to take a look at the holistic sense of, you know, how much are we asking and what are we asking of? And we're going to do the right thing. Still instill the values, but set priorities.

Another thing is that if you're not in an organization that really can do that sort of priority setting, there are some of the things they can do in order to make the the training much more effective. And for me, this is another human dimension thing. The training that I remember, the training that I consider valuable, the one I actually don't mind taking are the ones where you have both leaders and subject matter experts talking in the course of the training. There should be a leader message. I mean, there should be a message by somebody in charge who can provide the strategic reason for conducting the particular training. Putting the leadership stamp on it is kind of important because then it demonstrates ownership. And I think that that's one of the things that sometimes gets missing, if it's left entirely to, say, a contractor to create this training and off it goes, then the members don't feel like the leaders are committed to the message and so they don't commit to the message themselves. As for experts, what I would say is that the best video use of experts is in some sort of an organic discussion. So you have a scenario or you have some information in which you want to have a particular point made. Well, then a video of an expert who makes that point and delivers their personal experience of putting that information into action or to explain the case presented in their own words, rather than having the expert sort of recite the bullet points the way that a narrator would. I think that that level of that organic feel to the information is kind of important.

And then another one is something that we do in some of our mandatory training. Now, basically, if you take the refresher training, you can test out of some parts of it. So let's say that you have a program that has like nine modules in it, all of which are important. But let's say that last year you took you took the training for the first time. You took all nine modules and you passed and you're certified for a year. Then when it comes back for the next year, let's say that you get a pre-test with questions that come from those nine modules that you saw. And let's say that a tenth module was added. Well, if you get eight out of nine questions, right, then you test out of the eight modules, you have to retake the module you missed. And then you take the the tenth module, which allows you to take what would have been two two hours devoted to stuff you already knew and reduce it down to 20 minutes, 30 minutes, whatever is appropriate.

So there's there are ways to do this that make sense and reinforce the values, provide the information as necessary, but not become too overly burdensome because, you know, if you have legal requirements, you've got to meet them. But that doesn't mean that it has to feel like you're pulling teeth. The thing that we're asking ourselves is, is that if it's a requirement, then it should be appropriately invested in by the organization and by the leadership. And I believe that that would make it far more effective and ultimately would make it much less necessary to have to do as much refresher because retention would be far greater. So I think that this is something that organizations should look at more.

*... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.*

**ALL THE BEST!**  
**TOM GALVIN**