

q & a

BUILDING FLUENCY

If you've ever converted a set of class notes into flashcards to help you cram for an exam, you have a rudimentary understanding of what fluency building is about—and what Dr. Carl Binder believes is missing in most training. Binder, a behavioral psychologist and performance consultant, believes that trainees should show up on the job ready, willing and able to do the job they've been hired to do. Period. No excuses.

The key to Binder's philosophy is behavioral fluency training, an approach to learning and performance he traces to the operant behavior psychology of the late B.F. Skinner—whom Binder studied under—and the precision teaching ideas of Ogden Lindsley. Binder has successfully adapted his approach to sales and call center training, insurance and employee benefits consulting and retailing. *Training* caught up with Binder in his Santa Rosa, Calif., office.

What do you mean by fluency?

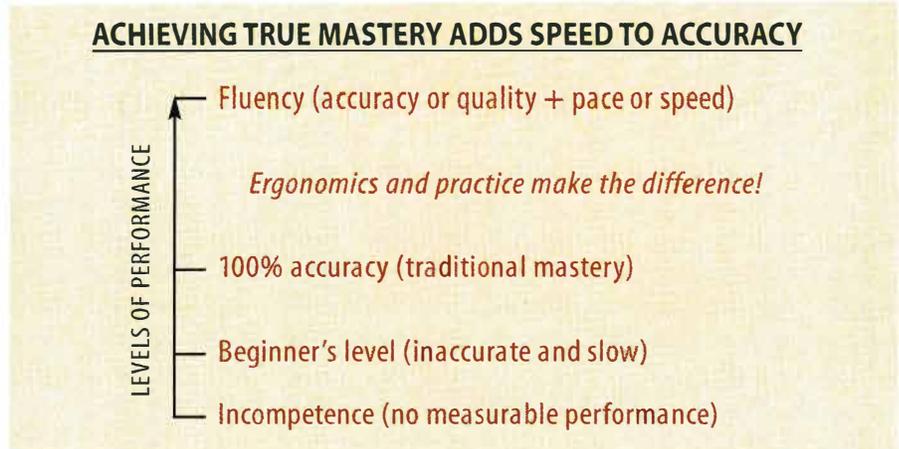
Behavioral fluency, or just plain fluency, is that combination of accuracy plus speed of performance that characterizes

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competence or true mastery. It is the ability to think, speak or act correctly and without hesitation. Fluency is the automatic or second-nature level of performance that we recognize as characteristic of true experts.

There is a contention that today's jobs require complex thought, not complex actions; that job behaviors are trivial in the knowledge worker era.

There are several things wrong with that assumption. First, information is



someplace. There are learnable skills required to find it efficiently and use it effectively. That takes practice in a training environment—not in front of a customer.

How exactly does fluency building work?

Og Lindsley's notion of incorporating a time dimension in the measurement of skill and knowledge is powerful. It changes the standard of mastery from simply being accurate to being efficient as well. It means we have to build training that includes practice to the point of required on-the-

job levels of performance. What we've found is that if we provide practice to that point and build in proper support, we get performance that is useful and is retained.

But don't most jobs have so much information in them that the sort of in-depth learning you advocate is awfully expensive?

In every job there is a lot of information, but only a small percentage of it must be learned to fluency. It's the subject matter expert's role to separate the need-to-know few from the nice-to-know many.

Even with that sorting down, there has to be a lot to learn. How do you structure that?

We use a variety of approaches: flash cards, practice sheets and one-to-one practice drills. But the key, we learned, is that practice works best when you practice small chunks—just like music or martial arts—until they are very fluid before we combine them. It can go quickly. And remember, not everything has to be fluent the first day. There may be things in a CRM system that can be looked up as needed. That's what's great about today's knowledge environment.

This sounds like a classroom-intensive effort.

Actually, it is ideal for a blended approach. For mastering job aids and reference materials and those things that trainees don't need to be fluent in on day one, e-learning is great. But we can get the most immediate return when we isolate those things that must be perfect day one, whether that is information finding or holding a customer dialogue, and practicing them to perfection and to fluency.

For more on fluency building training, see Binder's website at www.fluency.org —R.Z.