Smile Sheets Aren't Bad;

# Badly-Written Smile Sheets Are Bad

A Discussion of Factors and Elements that Make for Effective, Evidence-Based Post-Training Evaluation Sheets

Written by

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When analyzing a level 1 evaluation (smile sheet), research literature points to three major domains. These three items are necessary for examination to properly target a trainee's engagement with the training, as well as tease out any specific problems with engagement. These three domains of interest are:

- Person/Individual
- Situation
- Organization

Trainee Reactions and Engagement
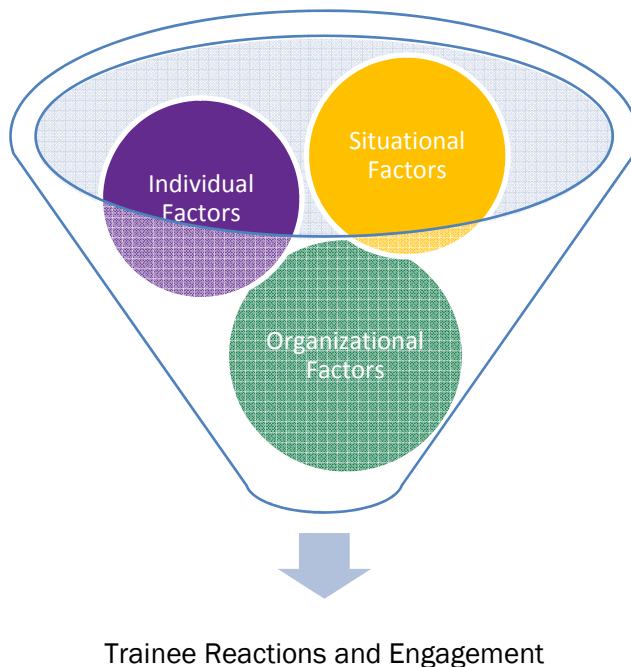
Person

This particular domain is of interest because of an accepted understanding about human behavior; human behavior is a factor of situation and disposition. The situation mentioned here is not the same as the domain of *situation* noted above. It is a subjective evaluation that the trainee makes about their given individual situation. While it can difficult for a facilitator or organization to impact a trainee's engagement level based on the things that are going on in their lives (job and personal), it is important to consider these factors when making assumptions about the effectiveness of a training program. If a person is in a generally poor mood because of outside (of training) influences, it is important to account for these things when gathering feedback from them about the training, so that these items are not mistaken for problems with the training program.

Most current smile sheets do not make allowances for personal situations. They simply move from noting that a person is not engaged (behavior) and make an assumption that there is a problem with the program, the facilitator, or the trainee (disposition) without checking to see if the problem with engagement is simply the trainee being distracted by outside influences (situation). At least measuring these factors and taking them into account in the final analysis of evaluations gives an evaluator an idea of whether or not the engagement problem is with the training program or with the trainee's emotional state on the given training day.

Three important dimensions of Person to explore in this domain are: Job Satisfaction, Mood, and Organizational Satisfaction.

Job Satisfaction **+** Mood **+** Organizational Satisfaction **=** Person Influence

The reason this is important stems from the above discussion. Imagine you are looking at an evaluation sheet that seems to point to a trainee being disengaged from the training, and you know that trainee was in a good mood that day, was pleased with their job, and was happy with the organization they are employed by. This situation would give you much more reason to look to the training program as a possible problem instead of the individual's personal situation. To take this example a bit further, imagine you are looking at a group of training evaluations that seem to point to disengagement with the training, and a large number of the evaluations point to deep dissatisfaction with their jobs, as well as dissatisfaction with the organization as a whole. While this information may not be of use in evaluating the training specifically, it is of great use for the organization in diagnosing deeper problems, instead of expending energy in an attempt to determine why a training program is failing.

Another example could stem from data analysis. Assume that you have collected all of your training feedback data and you run an analysis. The results of the analysis show that training engagement is always significantly lower on Tuesdays. There may be a common sense reason for this or there may be no obvious reason at all. However, it would be beneficial to the trainees as well as the company to stop conducting this training on Tuesdays. While the reason may not be known, using this information can save a company a lot of money in wasted training days, and the subsequent problems that come from lack of engagement.

You can think of this dimension of the Person as a way for the organization to make sure that their smile sheet results are properly targeted when they analyze the data. Looking at this dimension can help an organization save money and energy by properly allocating their efforts in training evaluation.
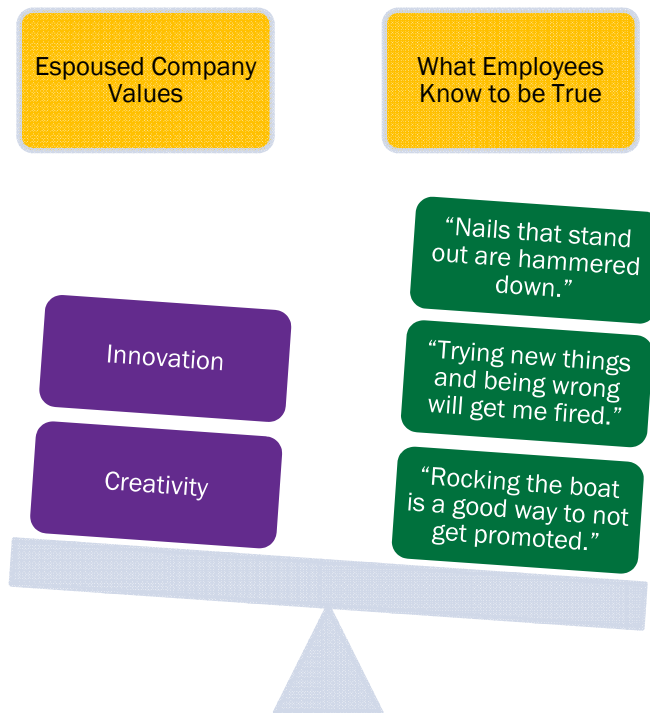
Organization
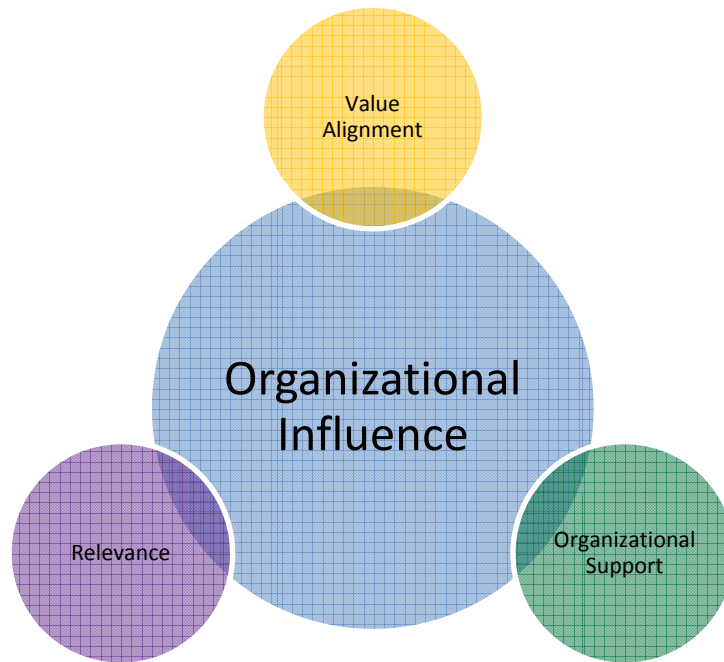
The second domain to examine is the organization and how it interplays with a trainee's perception of and engagement in training. Because trainees are a critical piece of the organization's mission and operations, how the trainees view the training in regard to the organization is critical to evaluating it. The first dimension in this domain is Organizational Value Alignment. Organizational Value Alignment can best be described as the degree to which an organization's espoused values line up with the values that are put into action on a day to day basis. This is critical because it can immediately turn a trainee on or off about whether or not the training has relevance to them, even if it has easily identifiable job relevance.

A good example of this is a common problem in a number of businesses. Many businesses claim to want creativity and innovation. However, if a company that claims to foster creativity and innovation is known for firing and disciplining employees that attempt new things and fail, their values are out of alignment. Essentially, they're rewarding conformity, while wishing for innovation. This is critical in training, because if an employee knows that innovation is not rewarded, they're going to disengage from training that is designed to teach innovative behavior, because they know it has no real relevance to them.

Espoused Company Values

What Employees Know to be True

"Nails that stand out are hammered down."

Innovation

"Trying new things and being wrong will get me fired."

Creativity

"Rocking the boat is a good way to not get promoted."

A second dimension of this domain is Organizational Support. This is an associated element of Value Alignment. Numerous examples in research and popular business literature show a positive link between the degree of support an organization shows in a program and the amount of employee engagement that is displayed. Major organizational change can fail or succeed based on how highly employees view the organization's interest in the change effort's success. Having an executive officer at the kick-off meeting of a task force team can inspire all of the members of the task force to attain its goals, because of the explicit show of company buy-in for success.

The same holds true for training. If trainees believe that their organization is highly invested in the training and takes it seriously, they are much more likely to buy into and engage in it, because they realize that the company is taking them and their jobs seriously. Conversely, if trainees believe that their employer is simply putting them through the motions of training, they are more likely to check out and not be engaged with the training program at all. Getting readings about the dimensions of Value Alignment and Organizational Support can help an instructional designer better design and frame training so that employees engage more fully with it, as well as give feedback to the organization about deeper problems with organizational culture, if a more organization-centric analysis is needed.

Another associated dimension is Relevance, and this dimension is much more self explanatory. However, in most smile sheets, this dimension is not given as much attention in a probing, deep fashion. Trainee engagement can be affected very deeply by whether or not they feel that the training they have received is going to be useful for them. Thus, it is important, especially in the pilot stages of a program, to determine if employees have the perception that the training they are receiving is a waste of their time. If they feel that they will not use the information they are being provided, then it is important to retool and reframe this information in a way so that they feel it has relevance in their daily work life.

Situation
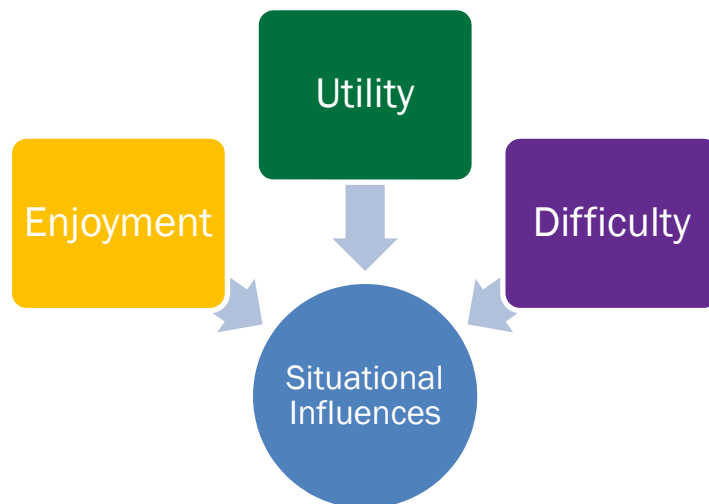
This domain is usually the portion of the smile sheet in most companies that is the most widely wasted. It asks about the temperature of the training room, the lighting, or the arrangement of seating. While all of these elements are important to note, they are not that important to be taken anonymously or to have a permanent record of them. As one researcher noted in her article, the facilitator can easily ask the group if they encountered any problems with the training environment. Then, in a 2- to 5-minute guided discussion while the group is filing out evaluations, the facilitator can jot down any notes that seem important, leaving more time for the trainees to provide more valuable feedback.

There are situations (such as management training) where Enjoyment is not as critical as some other elements of training (managers tend to have higher levels of engagement, even if their enjoyment of the training is lower). However, in other situations, there are high correlations between trainee enjoyment and engagement. Thus, taking note of the general level of affective pleasure with the training is important to record and analyze in regard to the other domains and dimensions explored above. The questions to elicit these responses are important and should targeted and not superficial.

These questions should be probing and thought provoking. They should make trainees think about what elements of the training they enjoyed, and which parts they enjoyed more than others. If they enjoyed the PowerPoint presentation, but not the in-class exercises, then this is important to know. Instead of overall enjoyment of the training program, it is more important to know what parts of the training program made it enjoyable.

Utility is another dimension of interest, because it gives the evaluator a sense for how the trainee feels about their ability to use the newly acquired information. Some research has noted that more engagement and a feeling that training has relevance are correlated with high self-efficacy (a sense of confidence about ability). Again, like the above questions, wording is extremely important. It is important to ask questions that cause the trainee to think about how they will utilize the training in the future. By thinking about the process, the same cognitive processes are activated that are brought into awareness when they actually use the skills. Thus, they are more able to make a good evaluation of their ability to use the skills.

A final dimension that has interaction with both utility, enjoyment, and other elements described previously, is an evaluation of how difficult the training was. If trainees perceive the training to have high utility and enjoyment, but little difficulty, then it may be important to evaluate if the training is too simple. Conversely, training that is very difficult, which trainees evaluate as low in utility and enjoyment may cause them to disengage from it and be less interested in trying to learn. These questions can be much more straight-forward (i.e.: "Was the training about the sales process difficult?"). Thus, they should be targeted to specific elements of the training, but they can ask about difficulty in a very direct fashion.

Other Important Notes

There are a few factors outside of a simple retooling of smile sheets that will get better data for an evaluator.

Evaluation Methodology

Since most companies view the smile sheet as something that is done out of habit, or just because of a sense that they're required, there is generally not much thought put into the question design. But, this is also a primary problem with them. Smile sheets are very much a GIGO (garbage in, garbage out) tool. If they are poorly designed, then the information that comes from them will have low relevancy, little utility, and at worse they may cause an instructional designer to change the training in ways that make it less engaging, instead of more engaging. Essentially, it is important to think carefully about each question. Ask yourself:

- Why am I asking about this?
- What do I hope to get out of it?
- Is there a better way to ask this?
- Is this question clear enough?
- Is this question asked another way someplace else?
- Could this question be turned into two questions?

Asking these questions carefully and being very critical about the answers will help in creating questions that will gather relevant data from the trainees that you are talking to. Without this process, you are in danger of missing out on the priceless data you have the opportunity to capture.

Capturing All of the Data

This is especially important to get good usable data. Researchers know how critical it is to have good, random samples of data to analyze. This is the foundation of all statistical analyses. The reason this is so important is that when people are given a choice about self-selection, there is a danger of only capturing small pockets of specific populations. If you only capture those who are extremely pleased with the training and those who are not, you miss everyone in the middle and all of the good information they might give you. Thus, it is important to try to capture those data. By asking everyone to fill out one of the forms, you will get a much better and much more indicative sampling of your population

That's why incentivizing your trainees or making the completion of smile sheets mandatory becomes so important. Doing so makes it much more likely to capture as much data as possible.

Reverse Scoring and Changing-Up Response Methods

Adding in some reverse scored questions as well as multiple response methods helps you make sure that your respondents are paying attention and are not just going through plugging in all 1's or 5's. It also makes the use of the smile sheet much more interesting and engaging to the people filling them out. When you are coding the data after receiving all of the responses back, it will help you to identify if someone was just going through the motions, instead of giving you good feedback. This method makes it easier to decide if you need to simply exclude those pieces of data. Having some different response methods will also slow people down and make them pay attention. If they realize that they cannot just make random marks on the page, you are much more likely to get them to slow down and take a few moments to read the questions and give you more useful feedback.

Incentives

One of the most critical pieces to data collection is getting as wide of a sample of the population as you can. Thus, using methods to get everyone to fill out an evaluation form is key to this endeavor. If you have ever received a survey from a company that wants your opinion on something, and it's a long form with numerous questions, you have probably asked yourself, "Why should I spend my time filling this out?" When your trainees are staring at a bank of questions on an evaluation form, they probably ask themselves the same thing, and it's not a question of their dedication to the company, but simple human nature. There is a strong persuasive element in reciprocal behavior, which is why a small incentive works so well. Human beings are hard-wired to want to reciprocate with people who give them something, so an incentive does not have to be monetary, but it should be explicit. It should be an incentive that is presented to elicit the trainee's behavior of spending some time giving you good feedback. You should simply factor this incentive into your training budget and plan for it. Some examples are:

- Paperclip a dollar to each survey form (a small fee to pay for valuable information)
- Plan for your 8 hour training session to only go for 7 hours, and then release everyone an hour early, asking them to take 15 minutes to fill out their survey
- Hand out a bottle of water with each survey
- Have a tray of snacks near the survey forms; if someone takes a snack, they're more likely to take a survey

About the Author

Dan Hawthorne is Director of Research for Intulogy. His expertise is in evidence-based behavior change through learning and organizational change. Throughout his career, he has conducted analyses for production, field, and office environments. Questions or comments about this white-paper can be directed to him at dan.hawthorne@intulogy.com

About Intulogy

Intulogy creates evidence-based solutions for organizational change and performance improvement. We offer strategic consulting (such as competencies and curricula maps) as well as tactical solutions— change management plans, diagnostic surveys, custom learning courses, and program evaluations.