

# Enhancing Transfer of Soft Skills Training within the Dutch Police

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## Abstract

With soft skills of employees becoming increasingly important for their successful performance, organisations spend a large amount of money on employee soft skills training. However, it often remains unclear to what extent such training is effective. The current research shows that transfer results after a soft skills training unfold in a stepwise, staged process, that start with being motivated to transfer, followed by using new skills. This use of skills may consequently turn into improved performance. Additionally, the

current research found that since the open character of soft skills may lead to many different types of outcomes in many different contexts (even unwanted transfer outcomes), being specific about the type, context and timeframe of performance (occurrence and measurement), is pivotal in gaining insight into successful transfer. In each transfer step, barriers to transfer may exist. Therefore, successful transfer also needs the disabling or minimising of existing barriers to success.

With soft skills of employees becoming increasingly important for their successful performance, organisations spend a large amount of money on employee soft skills training. However, for training to be effective, skills from the training should be effectively used at the workplace. Specifically, for soft skills training, such training-to-work transfer can be difficult to realise due to unclarity about what successful transfer means, how specific this should be measured and when. This article focuses on the effect of a self-leadership training within the Dutch Police and is based on a recently finished PhD project (Botke, 2021). The project included three studies. First, a literature review explored the transfer-to-work process and how work factors may act as a barrier for transfer. Next, the transfer process of the self-leadership training was researched in an empirical study including 155 crime scene investigators. Finally, the effectiveness of the training was tested in a second empirical study including 223 staff professionals

working at the Dutch police force. In this article, we share our findings and the lessons learnt.

### The effect of a mandatory self-leadership training

The self-leadership training “Mental Strength” is part of a program of the Dutch Police that aims at providing police officers tools to deal with stressful situations. Such stressful situations can both be external (i.e., stressful situations during the operational police work) or internal (i.e., stressful situations that are caused by internal/organisational situations). The two-day training includes six self-leadership strategies (self-goal setting, evaluating beliefs and assumptions, self-imagery, deep relaxed breathing, self-observation and self-talk). During the training, the skills are explained and practiced. The training is mandatory for all Dutch Police professionals and more than 45 000 have participated in the training since 2011.

Although previous research suggests that the use of self-leadership skills can enhance performance

of police professionals in demanding situations (e.g. Van der Meulen et al., 2018), it remained unclear when and how the current training was successful in improving performance of police professionals. Therefore, a Phd project was set up to explore the transfer of this training. Transfer of training refers to the effective application and use of skills acquired from training during work (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2019).

### Transfer of training is the Achilles heel of the training process

Research has shown that more than 80 per cent of the training outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and abilities are not applied in the real workplace (Patterson et al., 2012). The limited transfer of training results from a lack of clarity around how and when to use those skills, leaving trainees unsure of how to apply what they have learnt in training (Laker & Powell, 2011). Specifically, for soft skills training, such training-to-work transfer can be difficult to realise due to unclarity about what successful transfer means, how specific this should be measured and when. Note well that if trainees fail to use these new skills, training resources have effectively been wasted, and business results are unrealised (Ford et al., 2018). Therefore, to explore the results of the self-leadership training, we first unravelled the (so-called) transfer process.

### The transfer process

Transfer studies usually focus on either the trainees' *use of skills* on return to the workplace after having completed a training or on increased *performance* resulting from a training. In our study (Botke et al., 2018), we included both transfer outcomes (i.e., use of skills and the consequences of the effective use, that is, of (changed) work behaviours leading to improved individual and/or organisational performance). Additionally, the results from our study reveal that motivation to transfer is important to start using skills and that using skills is important for long-term performance improvement as a result of training. Thus, the post-training transfer process can be seen as a *stepwise, staged process*. First, trainees have to be motivated to use new skills (transfer stage 1), and then they may start using and practising the skills (transfer stage 2), which consequently may turn into sustainable new behaviour that facilitates per-

formance (transfer stage 3). The stepwise approach helps to see how successful training-to-work transfer unfolds (i.e., each step should be successful for a successful transfer). Therefore, if organisations want to ensure successful transfer to the work of soft skills training, they should check if there is motivation to transfer and (opportunity to) use what is learnt, before addressing performance outcomes.

### Testing the stepwise transfer model in practice

In our first empirical study (Botke et al., 2019), we tested the stepwise transfer model. We collected quantitative data of 155 crime scene investigators who participated in training on self-leadership skills. To investigate how and when a transfer occurs, we included two performance measures in our study ("keeping detached concern" and "dealing with a heavy workload") and we measured transfer results in two different work situations. We found that the trainees started using the self-leadership skills at work after the training. However, participants reported using the new skills more often in individual work situations compared to team situations. This indicates that employees may feel less confident using new skills in a team situation. Additionally, we only found a relationship between the use of new skills and the performance measure "keeping detached concern" (i.e. the participants indicated that using the skills from the training helped them to gain a better balance between emotional involvement and professional distance in critical work situations). The use of self-leadership skills did not seem to impact our other performance measure, "dealing with large workloads". Thus, a transfer may vary depending on work situation and performance measures.

In a second empirical study (Botke & Van Woerkom, 2020), we compared the performance of a trained group to a non-trained group. This non-trained group included professionals who would participate in the self-leadership training at a later date. For this study, we collected quantitative data of 233 staff professionals working for the Dutch Police. The trained group reported higher levels of detached concern compared to the non-trained group, indicating that a short self-leadership intervention can

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help increase the detached concern of police professionals. We also found that the lower the occupational self-efficacy was of the participants before their training, the more effect the training had on improving the performance of the participants following training. This indicates that individual performance results following training may differ based on an individual's feelings of competence beforehand. Organisations could make use of such knowledge to spend their training budgets more effectively.

#### Work factors impacting the transfer process

Features of the work environment have been thought to be particularly important to the post-training transfer (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Mathieu et al., 1992) because, while employees may be highly motivated

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individuals who have attended excellent training courses and are keen to use their new skills, constraints in the post-training work environment may prevent them from applying the learned content or skills in their jobs (e.g., Blume et al., 2010) (Blume et al., 2010; Salas et al., 2012). Kastenmüller et al. (2012) mention that a facilitating work environment is especially necessary for the transfer of soft skills training because these training types and their transfers require the participation of colleagues and supervisors.

The literature review (Botke et al., 2018) showed that limited motivation to transfer, use of skills and performance may be caused by the influence of social support (peers, subordinates and supervisors) as well as by the type learning culture of the organisation (facilitating or appreciating learning culture). Additionally, a lack of motivation to transfer after soft skills training may occur due to a lack of perceived content relevance of the training or a lack of perceived autonomy, and a lack of use may be caused by a lack of autonomy or a workload that is too high. A main actor during post-training transfer is the supervisor because the supervisor may be in the position to lower barriers of transfer, such as providing the proper context to practice new skills, influencing workload and autonomy (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) and ensuring a learning-supportive

work climate (Nikolova et al., 2014). The literature review shows that specific behaviours of the supervisor are important per transfer stage. For example, encouragement by the supervisor and discussion application are important during the first transfer stage (motivation to transfer), and informal reinforcement is important during all three transfer stages (Chapter 2). Additionally, the results from our first empirical study suggest that emotional supervisor support and appraisal supervisor support influence performance (i.e., they seem to influence how trainees were dealing with a heavy workload after the training).

#### Enhancing successful transfer-to-work of soft skills training

In sum, the PhD project stresses the importance of studying the full transfer process (i.e., including motivation to transfer in studying the outcomes of transfer). Additionally, the current research found that since the open character of soft skills may lead to many different types of outcomes in many different contexts (even unwanted transfer outcomes), being specific about the type, context and timeframe of performance (occurrence and measurement), is pivotal in gaining insight into successful transfer. In each transfer step, barriers to transfer may exist. Therefore, successful transfer also needs the disabling or minimising of existing barriers to success. This dissertation found that barriers can be in the transfer process (i.e., lack of motivation, lack of (opportunity to) use or lack of enough time to practice), in the work context (job relevance, workload, autonomy, social support, learning climate) or related to the trainees (i.e., their self-efficacy may both hinder and enable transfer). The role of the supervisor is crucial during transfer. Employees view the supervisor as a personal extension of the organisation, and it is unrealistic to expect transfer if a supervisor is not acknowledging and supporting the steps in the post-training transfer process.

#### Implications for the Dutch police

This PhD research has shed light on the outcomes of a soft-skills training that was unrolled throughout the entire Dutch police force. Unrolling a training on such a scale necessitates a deeper understanding of what actually happens in the transfer of the training to real life police work. If anything, this research shows that investments in soft-skills training

should be done with careful attention: the organisation should pinpoint what should be learnt in what working conditions – and should have a specific plan in terms of supporting context, including supervisor role. This lesson does not apply merely to the Mental Strength programme, but to expected soft-skills training outcomes in general. This study thus also serves as good practice for police training. Understanding the outcome of training requires diligent research, far beyond a simple average score of participants' contentment after training.

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## Zusammenfassung

### Verbesserung des Praxistransfers von *Soft Skills* bei der niederländischen Polizei

*Soft Skills* gewinnen für die Leistungsfähigkeit der Mitarbeitenden immer mehr an Bedeutung. Unternehmen geben deshalb viel Geld für die Schulung ihres Personals in diesem Bereich aus. Häufig bleibt jedoch unklar, inwieweit solche Schulungen von Nutzen sind. Diese Studie zeigt, dass sich die Ergebnisse des Transfers nach einer Schulung im Bereich der *Soft Skills* in einem schrittweisen Prozess entfalten – beginnend mit der Motivation zum Transfer und gefolgt von der Anwendung der neuen Kompetenzen. Diese Verwendung der Kompetenzen kann

in der Folge zu einer besseren Leistung führen. Darüber hinaus ergab die aktuelle Studie, dass es aufgrund des offenen Charakters von *Soft Skills* zu einer Vielzahl von Ergebnissen in den unterschiedlichsten Kontexten kommen kann (sogar zu unerwünschten Transferergebnissen). Daher ist es von zentraler Bedeutung, die Art, den Kontext und den Zeitraum der Leistung (Auftreten und Messung) genau zu bestimmen, um Aufschluss über den Erfolg des Transfers zu erhalten. Bei jedem Transferschritt können Transferhindernisse auftreten. Für einen erfolgreichen Transfer müssen deshalb auch bestehende Erfolgsbarrieren beseitigt oder minimiert werden.

## Résumé

### Améliorer le transfert de la formation aux compétences relationnelles au sein de la police néerlandaise

Les compétences relationnelles, dites « *soft skills* », des collaboratrices et collaborateurs étant de plus en plus importantes pour mener à bien leurs activités, les organisations dépensent beaucoup d'argent pour les former. Cependant, il est souvent difficile de savoir dans quelle mesure cette formation est efficace. Cette étude montre que les résultats du transfert après une formation aux compétences non techniques se déroulent selon un processus par étapes, qui commence par la motivation à transférer, suivie de l'utilisation de nouvelles

compétences. Cette utilisation des compétences peut ensuite se traduire par une amélioration des performances. En outre, la recherche actuelle a révélé que, puisque le caractère ouvert des compétences non techniques peut conduire à de nombreux types de résultats dans de nombreux contextes différents (même des résultats de transfert non souhaités), il est essentiel d'être spécifique quant au type, au contexte et à la période de performance (occurrence et mesure) pour avoir une idée de la réussite du transfert. À chaque étape du transfert, des obstacles au transfert peuvent exister. Par conséquent, un transfert réussi nécessite également la désactivation ou la minimisation des obstacles existants.

## Riassunto

### Migliorare il trasferimento nella formazione orientata alle soft skills all'interno della polizia olandese

Le cosiddette « *soft skills* » sono sempre più importanti per portare a termine con successo le proprie attività e le organizzazioni investono grandi somme di denaro per formare i propri collaboratori in questo ambito. Tuttavia, è spesso difficile valutare l'efficacia di tali formazioni. Lo studio presentato in questo articolo mostra che, dopo una formazione orientata alle *soft skills*, il trasferimento mostra i suoi risultati in un processo graduale: si inizia con essere motivati a trasmettere le conoscenze per poi passa-

re all'applicazione di nuove competenze, che può a sua volta tradursi in un miglioramento delle performance. Inoltre, la ricerca attuale ha rivelato che, per ottenere informazioni sull'efficacia del trasferimento, è essenziale essere precisi riguardo al tipo, al contesto e al periodo di performance (occorrenza e misura): il carattere ampio delle *soft skills* può infatti condurre a numerosi tipi di risultati in altrettanti contesti differenti (anche risultati non desiderati). In ogni fase del processo vi possono essere ostacoli al trasferimento, che è necessario rimuovere o minimizzare per garantire gli esiti sperati.