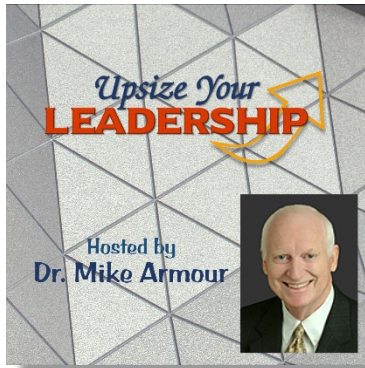# The Tradeoffs of Virtual Training
Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people in all walks of life to become comfortable with virtual interactions with people rather than face-to-face interactions. Nowhere has this been more decidedly the case than in training.

Live, in-person trainings have all but disappeared over the past twelve months. Companies have responded either by foregoing training altogether or by turning to virtual training.

Now that the end of the pandemic restrictions is in sight, leaders have to decide how they will approach training going forward. Will they resume more traditional, live trainings? Will they continue to rely entirely on virtual training? Or will they develop some type of hybrid?

As a lifelong trainer, I thought it might be timely to offer managers and executives my perspectives on virtual versus traditional training structures. I have a special interest, of course, in leadership and management training. Training in these fields has been my primary work, along with leadership and executive coaching, ever since I began Strategic Leadership Development International twenty years ago.

Corporate and business training have changed immensely over that period of time. One of the biggest changes came once computing and communication technology matured to the point that online training was practical and feasible through webinars and digitally-delivered courses. Then, virtual training made its appearance, basically as an extension of video conferencing.

Since COVID struck, virtual training is the default for almost every company which has continued to do leadership and management training over the past year. Is that the best choice for the future? Let's explore this question for a few minutes, shall we? After all, nothing is more important than quality training for your team if your goal is to upsize your leadership.

To be honest, I purposefully avoided the transition to virtual training until the COVID pandemic forced me into it. I genuinely believed – as I still believe – that live, in-person training adds a dimension and dynamic to the learning experience which technology simply cannot replicate. I'll have more to say about that momentarily.

Once it became apparent, however, that the COVID restrictions were going to be with us longer than just a few weeks, I began repackaging my most popular courses for virtual delivery. And

I've looked at virtual training from both the trainer's perspective and the student perspective. I'm actually a student participant in several virtual training programs myself right now. I'm using this experience to see how the learning experience is enhanced or hampered by how virtual trainers deliver their subject matter.

From a variety of viewpoints, there is much to commend virtual training. Not the least of these are the economic considerations. When business leaders consider a training program, they have to factor in a great many costs other than the trainer's fee.

First is the cost of the training site. Probably half of my clients do not have a space on site which is large enough to accommodate a training for more than 15 people or so. For a training which involves several dozen employees, they must either rent space for the event or they must repeat the same training for two or three different groups, thus elevating the trainer's fee.

A second consideration is the cost of meals. Most full-day trainings are scheduled so that participants eat their lunch at the training site. This not only saves time (which allows for more training content), it also allows the afternoon sessions to resume more punctually. Nevertheless, the cost of providing these meals adds to the total expense for the training.

Third is the cost of travel. Before the pandemic hit, I was doing trainings for companies who were bringing workers together from across the nation – and in some cases, from overseas. Not only does the company face the cost of the airfares, but participants lose a day (or a better portion of a day) on travel to the training and then again on travel back home. The training thus takes a toll on productivity by pulling so many people offline for travel.

Another advantage of virtual training is the simplicity of recording the event for posterity's sake. Except for trainings of rather small groups, I usually assume that one or more people who were slated to participate will be unable to attend. Sometimes their non-attendance stems from a health issue. Sometimes from a family emergency. Sometimes due to canceled flights. A host of disruptions can prevent their presence in the training.

A recording of the training allows these non-attendees, on their own schedule, to benefit from what they missed in the live training. This is also beneficial to the company when it wants all of its people in certain positions to have had the same training.

Of course, there's nothing to prevent a company from recording a training session and keeping the recording archived for future training purposes. Many of my trainings were being recorded for this reason long before virtual training was even a remote dream. But if this recording was done by a professional crew, it was quite expensive. And if it was done by volunteers, there were inevitable problems with lighting and sound. Even if the trainer had a good microphone, questions or comments from the participants were often either inaudible or too muffled to understand.

Virtual training changed all of that. Video conferencing services now allow a meeting or training to be recorded seamlessly by capturing the screen displays and microphone input from every participant. And there is an added advantage. Prior to virtual training, projected material was not always easy to capture on camera. In virtual training, when the trainer utilizes a graphic through screen-sharing, it's recorded along with the other classroom input.

With all of these benefits to be derived from virtual training, why would anyone entertain the idea of going back to live training? In a word, it's because live training provides more effective

communication. That may sound a bit strange, given how clearly virtual training captures voices and visuals. But when we consider the communication process as a whole, virtual training does not accommodate some of the most important aspects of communication.

One of these is the energy in the room. We've all had the experience of being in an audience that was electrified or enthralled or awe-struck. The energy flowing through such an audience is altogether different from what we feel in an audience which is bored, tired, or drowsy. When energy in the room is high, it becomes contagious. People sense it in one another. One person's enthusiasm for a new idea or fresh insight gets picked up by others. Comments build on one another, accelerating the pace at which participants learn from one another. Jokes or light-hearted comments trigger laughter which everyone in the room can hear and be caught up in – something which usually does not occur in virtual trainings, where most participant microphones are muted, either voluntarily or by the host.

If you are not a trainer or a public speaker yourself, or if you have no background in drama, you may not realize how much a "performer" (whether a trainer, a keynoter, a comedian, an actor) feeds off of the energy in the room. Personally, I find it difficult to maintain an appropriately high energy level in a virtual training, because I'm not getting the energy feedback from the audience. I freely confess, therefore, that while I know that I'm quite effective in virtual trainings, I never feel that I'm on my very best game in that kind of setting.

One reason is that, without feedback from the energy in the room, I have a hard time sensing when the energy is dropping and I need to change pace. This is especially important in afternoon trainings after people have eaten a big lunch. The inevitable afternoon slump settles in. I need to throw a greater variety of exercises, activities, humor, and intriguing stories into afternoon trainings to keep everyone engaged. And I depend on non-verbal feedback from the room to know when I've reached a moment which calls for a change of pace.

I also miss the eye contact which comes with face-to-face training. People's eyes tell you a lot. In a live class setting, there are a great many visual distractions trying to grab participant attention. Are they resisting those temptations by keeping their eyes fixed on the trainer? Does the expression in their eyes and their facial responses indicate that they are fully engaged? Confused? Upset? Side-tracked?

That's very difficult to gauge in virtual training, especially if there are so many participants that a single screen cannot display all of their thumbnail video feeds. What's more, every thumbnail video on the screen is someone staring at his or her own computer screen, usually with their camera so positioned that they never appear to be looking directly at you. And you cannot even scan the thumbnails displayed without taking your eyes off the camera and thus losing the impact of your own eye-contact with the group.

Added to this, the only non-verbal feedback I get from the participants is from their shoulders up. Yes, I can pick up non-verbal signals when they are speaking. But a given individual is speaking for only a miniscule portion of the training. When the person is not speaking, I can't gain much feedback about their posture or their body language. Are they leaning forward or leaning back? You can't always tell. Are they impatiently fidgeting with a pencil, drumming their fingers, watching a TV on the wall behind their computer? Usually, I can only guess.

I also find that with virtual trainings, breakout sessions are not nearly as lively, interactive, or stimulating as they are when four or five people are circled up and going at a problem in an energetic dialogue. Additionally, when breakouts are underway in a live session, I can wander

around the room, listening to the various groups and quickly picking up that a particular group has misinterpreted the exercise, has allowed themselves to get sidetracked on a peripheral issue, is stumped and needs a provocative question or comment to move them forward in their thinking. Although I can eavesdrop on individual breakout groups in a virtual training, it's not nearly as effective as being able to monitor several groups simultaneously and move immediately to help when I sense that one of them needs some friendly counsel from the instructor.

Now, there will be some who will say that the points I've made about room energy and non-verbal communication is interesting, but not all that important for training to be effective. It's worthwhile to remember, however, that professional students of communication never tire of pointing out that less than 20 percent of a message is the verbal content. The non-verbal package which houses the message carries most of the weight. Never dismiss the importance of the non-verbal.

Just today I was talking with a longtime friend whose graduate work is in communication and who currently teaches persuasive speaking at the collegiate level. When COVID restrictions forced her to deliver her class virtually, the prevailing assumption in her administration was that the virtual approach would have little negative impact, and perhaps even a positive impact, on the students. After all, this was a generation raised in a virtual world and accustomed to interacting routinely in a virtual environment.

What we have learned, however, is that many students don't like virtual classes as much as they do live classes. And overall, students do not learn as well in the absence of live, person-to-person interaction. There are exceptions to this rule, of course. But it's true more often than not.

I'm on the board of a small liberal arts college whose faculty is fully committed to student success. When a student begins underperforming or seeming to lose interest, these devoted faculty members spring into action to work with the student one-on-one to reverse the growing disengagement.

In this past year of COVID restrictions, these faculty members have had to be proactive with far more students whose grades were slipping and whose interest was obviously lagging. I can understand this problem. I've noticed that when I'm a participant in a virtual class, it's very easy for me to become dissociated from what's going on, even though I'm quite interested in the topic. With almost no effort at all, I can stare at the screen and look engaged while my mind is off somewhere miles away.

Of course, we've all daydreamed in classes, especially classes like one which I had my sophomore year in college. The professor was perhaps the most boring lecturer you could imagine. One day a clown in the back of the room said in a strong stage whisper, "You know, I would drop this course, but I need the sleep."

So, having your mind miles away is just as possible in live trainings as in virtual ones. It's simply a lot easier to disengage when the setting is virtual. And anecdotal evidence indicates that it happens more often.

I'm therefore looking forward personally to be back in live training settings in the near future. Will virtual training go away completely? Not at all. Some people will actually prefer it, and some companies will opt for it from the simple economics. But in my judgment, the most effective training will occur in more traditional settings.

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Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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