

Designing Backwards, Moving Forwards

Mike Thomas · Founder & Director | 7 min read · May 2026

Most training fails not because of poor delivery — but because it was designed from the wrong end.

We start with the activities we know, the sessions we've run before, the content that feels familiar. What we rarely start with is the question that should come first: what do we actually want people to be able to do differently when this is over?

Start at the Finish Line

The most effective training begins with the end in mind. Confirm the outcome you want to achieve, and then plan backwards — ensuring every element of the programme contributes directly to that outcome.

This sounds straightforward. In practice, it requires resisting the instinct to reach for your favourite activities and instead asking: what should staff know, value, or be able to do as a result of this training? Only when that's clear can you design the path that gets them there.

Identifying the Real Need

Before designing anything, conduct a **Training Needs Analysis (TNA)**. This structured process identifies the gap between the current state — what exists now — and the desired state — what should exist.

The TNA prevents what might be called "training for training's sake": teaching unnecessary skills, missing critical areas, or delivering content that staff struggle to connect to their actual work. It channels resources toward the interventions that matter.

Three Domains of Learning

When we design training, we're attempting to help participants change something in one of three areas — drawn from Bloom's foundational work on learning (1956):

- **Cognitive — What staff know:** Mental skills, knowledge, and intellectual abilities. Recall of facts, understanding concepts, applying knowledge, analysing information, adapting to new situations.
- **Affective — How staff feel and engage:** Growth in values, motivation, and attitudes. Awareness, participation, and acting consistently with shared values.
- **Psychomotor — What staff can physically do:** Physical movement, coordination, and skill developed through practice.

Effective training intentionally addresses all three. Staff who only *know* what to do, without understanding *why* it matters or having practised *how* to do it, are not truly prepared.

Making Goals Concrete: The SMART Filter

Once needs are identified and outcomes defined, SMART goal-setting ensures each objective is both clear and achievable:

- **Specific** — "Improve facilitation skills" is too vague. "Staff will use open-ended questions to encourage reflection at least twice in each group debrief" is specific.
- **Measurable** — Goals must have observable indicators so progress can be tracked.
- **Achievable** — Pitched correctly: challenging enough to engage, realistic enough to reach.
- **Relevant** — Aligned with existing knowledge and skills; building from a foundation rather than assuming one.
- **Time-bound** — Every goal needs a timeline. Deadlines create focus without unnecessary pressure.

Connecting Activities to Impact: Theory of Change

One of the most powerful tools in training design is the **Theory of Change** — a roadmap that connects the needs of a given context to the intended impact of a programme. It clarifies not just *what* change is intended, but *why* and *how* it will happen.

In practice: identified need → resources and constraints → planned activities → intended outcomes → desired impact.

The Most Important Principle: Be Intentional

Perhaps the greatest risk in staff development is repeating outdated methods simply because *that's how it's always been done*. Every element should earn its place. When training is designed backwards — from outcome to plan — it becomes more focused, more meaningful, and far more likely to transfer into practice.

Practical Takeaways

1. **Conduct a Training Needs Analysis** — design around actual gaps, not assumptions
2. **Start with outcomes, not activities** — decide what staff should know, value, and do after training
3. **Balance all three learning domains** — knowledge, skills, and attitudes
4. **Use SMART goals** — make progress visible, actionable, and measurable
5. **Apply a Theory of Change** — connect training activities to long-term impact
6. **Stay intentional** — challenge the status quo and continually refine

The goal isn't just to teach — it's to transform. And transformation happens when knowledge, skills, and values align to create people who are genuinely equipped for what comes next.

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