

Training 101

STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING

Oftentimes, the hard part about training isn't the presentation of the program content. With preparation and practice, we can learn the content thoroughly and become proficient at presenting it. What's harder is facilitating the learning process.

In "I Can Recite the Program Content in My Sleep," Steve De Valk examines three group dynamics that are sure to challenge every trainer at some point: groups that are too large, groups that are reluctant to talk, and groups that talk a mile a minute about everything but the issue at hand. Preparing to handle such groups is just as important as preparing the program content. De Valk describes some practical strategies for managing these dynamics so that they don't impede learning.

In "Inquiring Trainers Want To Know," Rodney Beary looks at another strategy: asking questions. He describes nine ways in which trainers can "ask before they tell"; in other words, use questions to enhance the learning process.

"I Can Recite the Program Content in My Sleep. Now What?"

By Steve De Valk, De Valk Associates, 475 Central Park West, Suite 5C, New York, NY 10025.

We can never predict with any certainty the "baggage" that people bring into the training room. Trainees filter program content through that baggage, including their life experiences, background with the training topic, upbringing, hidden agendas, and personal and work relationships with other program participants.

All that baggage guarantees that the training process will never be 100 percent predictable. But there are some group dynamics that a new trainer can generally expect to face while delivering programs. Let's look at three common situations that all trainers should prepare for:

- unwieldy group size
- group silence
- overly fast group pace.

Rather than be caught off guard by these dynamics, new trainers can increase their self-confidence and enhance their effectiveness as group facilitators by anticipating problems and preparing strategies for managing them.

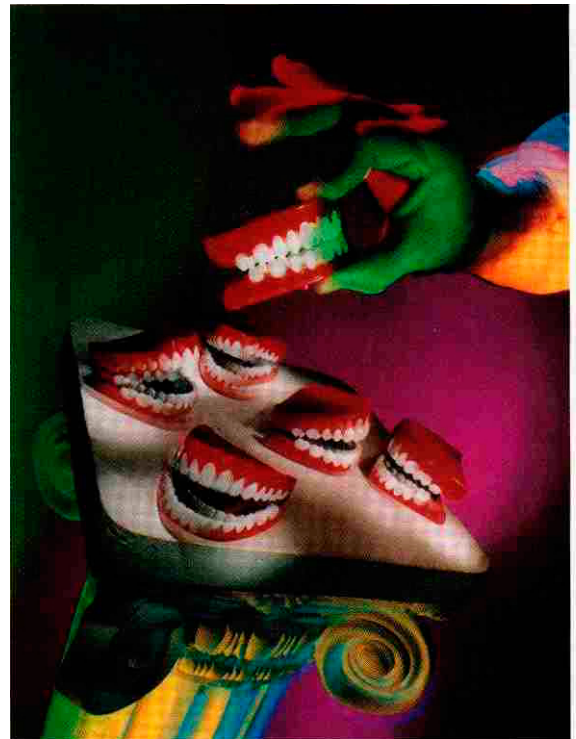
Two's company; 75 is a crowd. Presenting training

to a large group can be frustrating for trainees and trainers. People tend to want their feelings, experiences, and thoughts heard. But in a large group, trainers tend to hear the loudest and most aggressive trainees, sometimes to the exclusion of other input. People speak over one another. And we lose some of their comments in the chaos.

As a result, stress levels rise. But there are ways to manage a group that is larger than you'd like.

If trainees perceive you to be unaware of the unwieldy group size, they will act out their frustration in unhealthy ways (such as attacking the trainer, being especially rough with other trainees, or heightening already-existing resistance to the content of the program).

Prevent that behavior by verbally acknowledging the large size of the



Michael Northrup

How do you handle a training group that's too big, too quiet, or too talkative?

group. Tell participants you understand that everyone has a lot to say. Sometimes trainees need only to know that the trainer is aware of the situation. Once they are aware that the trainer understands their frustration, they are more likely to be patient.

With a large group, it is important to establish a structure for discussions that is stronger than what you'd use for a small group. Let trainees know that you want everyone to be heard. But remind them that the only way you can give them all the opportunity to speak is to work your way around the room, beginning on one side.

This strategy eliminates the need for trainees to sit for long periods with their hands in the air. It also allows them to hear what everyone is saying, rather than waiting to get the trainer's attention and blocking out whatever is being said by other trainees. And it reduces the number of interruptions. If you set this strategy as a ground rule, you may find it necessary to remind trainees of it frequently. And once you've established it, be sure to stick to it.

Another advantage of this kind of structure is that it encourages trainees to listen to viewpoints that may be different from their own—a critical skill for everyone in the workplace—rather than jumping into a discussion and cutting off each other's input.

When trainees are speaking, stand on the opposite side of the room from them. In large groups, people may have a difficult time hearing comments, and trainees tend to address their comments to the trainer. If you stand across the room from the trainee who is speaking, he or she is more likely to speak loudly enough so that everyone can benefit from the input.

You can hear a pin drop. At one time or another, we've all been afraid of putting our foot in our mouth during a discussion. Every time we speak in public, we risk having someone label us or disagree with our views.

Trainees are no different. Many are afraid of what people will think of their input. In addition, they are a part of the politics that exist in every organization or work unit—politics that trainers may see for one day,

but that trainees live with after the training program. With this in mind, it is easy to understand why some trainees are afraid of speaking out—and why it is so important to them to save face in front of co-workers.

But the result can be a training session in which participants refuse to participate. There are some strategies for helping them open up.

First of all, make sure you spend enough time warming up the group before you start delivering the content of the program. Think of your interaction with the group just as you would any of the one-on-one interactions you have every day. We usu-



DON'T BE AFRAID TO ADDRESS THE GROUP'S SILENCE HEAD-ON

ally don't jump right to business in such interactions. Instead, we break the ice by asking how the other person is doing, letting the person know a little about ourselves, and creating a comfortable environment so that we can concentrate on the content of the interaction.

The same goes for a group. If you jump right into your content, group members are not likely to hear your message. And they are unlikely to have anything to say. Even in a large group you must take the time to break the ice. This can be done simply by asking each trainee to give his or her name and position with the company. An added advantage to this strategy is that it can help you learn about the different organizational levels in the room and antici-

pate how people's positions might affect the discussion.

Many trainees try to interject humor into their introductions to the group. This helps loosen up everyone—and it takes much of the ice-breaking responsibility off of the trainer.

Don't be afraid to address the group's silence head-on. Ask participants why they are so quiet. Let them know that some of the other groups you've trained have been very vocal when discussing the issues. If you haven't done the program before, rely on your experiences as a trainee when discussing similar program content. You may not get the response you want from the group, but it lets trainees who want to speak up know that you are aware they are out there.

After breaks and lunch, ask the group "Would anyone like to share any discussions from during the break about what we covered so far?" If group members are silent before a break, they usually can't wait to leave the classroom to share what they really wanted to say with people they are comfortable with.

You may be tempted to ignore the silences and move quickly ahead on the agenda. Resist the temptation. Respect silences and maintain an even pace, allowing trainees opportunities to participate if they would like.

Trainees who are uncomfortable with a topic may breathe a quiet sigh of relief when they notice the trainer filling in all the silences and moving forward. They become comfortable with the trainer doing all the work, knowing they don't have to participate. But this kind of comfort is unlikely to produce changes in trainees' knowledge level, behavior, or job performance.

Treat trainees fairly when they do make comments. Thank them for their input. Of course, this is a good skill for trainers to practice all the time. But it's especially important in a class in which trainees are reluctant to talk. It shows silent trainees that the trainer will make sure they don't lose face in front of others if they do speak up.

Sometimes trainees who are silent verbally are actually quite "talkative"

in nonverbal ways. Be sensitive to nonverbal communication. Are they rolling their eyes? Did someone's eyes light up when you raised an issue? Did a trainee suddenly sit forward in his or her seat?

You can encourage participation by telling trainees that you noticed their reactions and asking them if they have anything to say. If you don't think a trainee is comfortable being spotlighted in the group, you can approach the person on a break and do the same thing. If the trainee does have a comment about the issues on the table, you can invite the person to share the comment with the group after break.

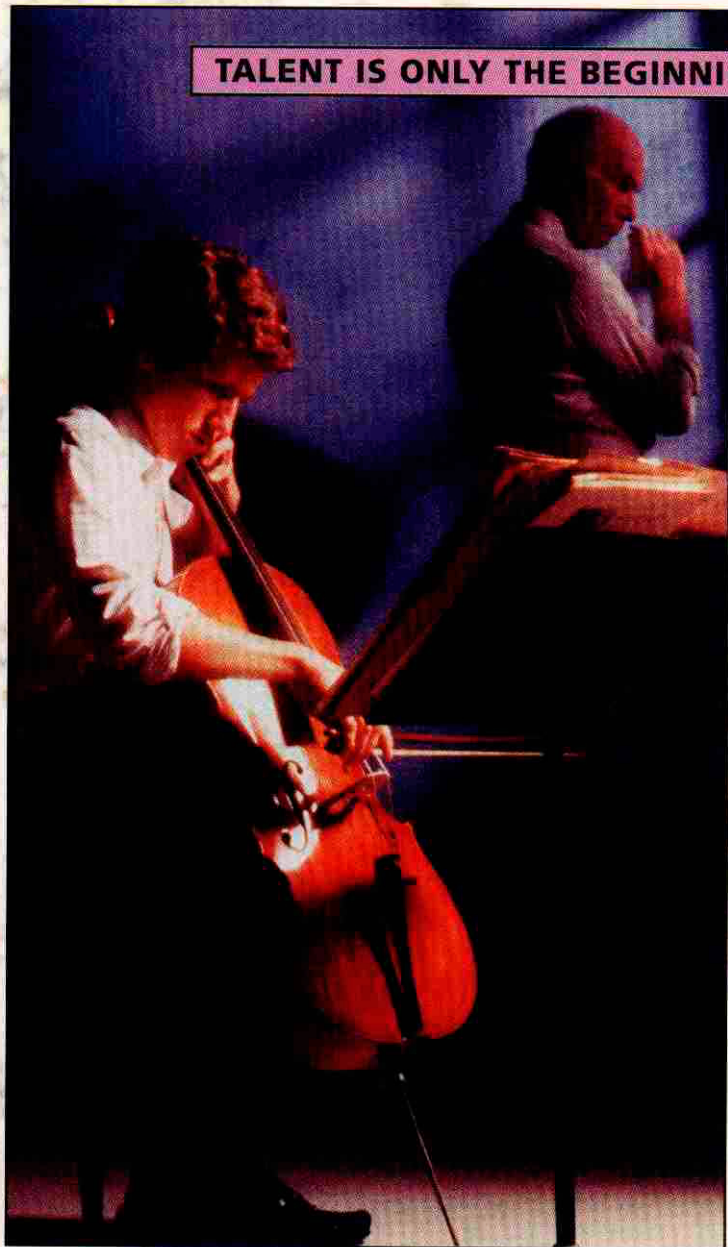
"I can't hear myself think." The trainer's objective is not only to ensure that everyone who wants to contribute can contribute, but to guide and focus the discussions so that people learn.

Sometimes a trainer walks away from a program feeling good because everyone said a lot. People may have said a lot, but they may not have heard each other. Or they may have skimmed over some important issues because every new comment represented a change of topics (a form of group denial).

In such situations, the process is happening too quickly. People may have felt as if they said their "two cents worth," but little change occurred. Some useful strategies can help slow down the process and facilitate a useful discussion.

When trainees jump in with comments that change a topic you aren't finished with, don't let the group go off onto the new issue. Acknowledge the importance of the trainees' comments, assure them that you will come back to their issue, and then rephrase or summarize the original topic. Ask the group if anyone has any further comments about the issue at hand. And always make sure you get back to the new topics raised by other trainees.

Rely on your audience to keep discussions focused. If you feel a discussion is going off course, turn to the trainee that raised the original issue and ask if the group is addressing that issue. If the trainee thinks the group is not, ask the trainee to restate or clarify the issue. Then invite



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the group to comment.

Sometimes trainees are so intent on getting their comments heard that they block out everything else that's being said. In this case, you can allow the trainee to make the comment, acknowledge it by paraphrasing it, and then politely ask if the trainee heard the comments of the trainee who spoke before.

Inquiring Trainers Want To Know

By Rodney P. Beary, Beary Consulting Group, 2037 Mustang Drive, Naperville, IL 60565.

Ask before you tell. In other words, use questions to enrich your training programs.

Questions have been used since the time of Socrates to investigate, solve problems, make decisions or plans, and teach. Knowing how and when to use questions can make a huge difference in the effectiveness of any trainer's programs. Properly constructed questions can be used to establish rapport, assess participant knowledge and perspectives, identify barriers to learning, and customize material to an audience.

Questions should be an integral component in the accomplishment of your training objectives. And, they add no cost to the design of the program. Well-crafted questions can serve at least nine purposes in a training program:

- ▶ to function as an icebreaker
- ▶ to determine knowledge levels
- ▶ to expose attitudes
- ▶ to deflect misdirected hostility
- ▶ to stimulate discussion
- ▶ to demonstrate and share knowledge
- ▶ to provide smooth transitions
- ▶ to enhance learning
- ▶ to facilitate team building.

Let's look at those nine functions in greater detail.

Break the ice. Many trainers use icebreakers of some kind to begin sessions. One purpose of an icebreaker is to make participants feel comfortable with each other and with the upcoming training experience. If that is the goal for your icebreaker, a question can be the perfect start.

Questions can help customize generic icebreaker formats. After all, warming participants to the topic of training is just as important as making them feel comfortable. An icebreaker that does not relate closely enough to the subject matter might succeed in loosening up the group. But when it's over, you have to start over again when moving to the subject of the day. It's a little like telling a joke at the beginning of a speech. The joke may have been funny, but what are you going to do next?

Use questions to integrate your warm-up period with the content of the training. For instance, assign participants to small groups to discuss and answer questions in as concrete and basic terms as they can.

In a session on managerial roles, for example, you could ask such

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questions as these:

- ▶ "What is the purpose of having a leader over a group of people at work?"
- ▶ "What are four human-relations skills that you think are most important for success in your job?"

Participants should think about the questions, discuss the topics in small groups, and present their answers to you and the class. Then you have accomplished at least six things:

- ▶ Everyone is involved.
- ▶ People start to get to know each other.
- ▶ You have established your expertise on the subject and can empathize with the group.
- ▶ The group is warmed up and comfortable with the task at hand.
- ▶ You have data that are unique to the group, so you can customize your presentation to meet trainees' needs.
- ▶ You are launched into the context of the session without having wasted time on superfluous exercises.

Determine knowledge level. Failure to determine the knowledge level of your group can be hazardous to your success. If you underestimate the participants' level of expertise, you'll seem like a lightweight. If you overestimate their level of expertise, you'll seem like a pedant.

If you "ask before you tell," you can eliminate those pitfalls. Questions can help you gauge the knowledge level of trainees, so you can more fully utilize their talents.

For example, in teaching a course on problem-solving techniques, you could ask the class: "What formal training have you had on problem solving in the past five years?"

The answers enable you to adjust the level of your presentation to the level of the group. They can also help you match the group members who are knowledgeable with those who are less so. This can minimize learning frustration for the less skilled and make the course more interesting for those asked to serve as resident experts.

Expose attitudes. In addition to their knowledge levels, the mental state of the participants can make or break your presentation. Do participants have underlying negative attitudes—toward you, the subject, the organization, or life in general—that could affect learning? If so, it is important to

unearth those attitudes, especially in a lengthy session. Carefully worded questions can help do the trick.

For example, say you are to present the new salary-administration plan for the year, and you don't expect it to be well received. You could start the session with a question such as this: "How would you describe the economic environment

in which the organization is operating today?"

Asking the question first might not make employees like the salary plan any better. But their involvement in a discussion of the business environment that necessitated the change may give them a greater understanding of the reasons behind the new plan.

Sometimes group members want a

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chance to “vent” before they are in the proper frame of mind to get into a subject. If you sense pent-up frustration, consider using a question or two to provide some relief. For example, say you are teaching effective employee discipline to a group of first-line supervisors who feel that the company is much too lenient. Ask the following question: “How many of your employees actually cause you serious problems?”

This will put the issue in perspective and allow the group to focus on the objective of learning effective disciplinary techniques, instead of dwelling on a perceived lack of support from upper management.

Deflect misdirected hostility. Some negative attitudes manifest themselves as personal attacks on the trainer. The trainer can be treated as the proverbial Greek Messenger, who is punished for the content of the message. This is especially true when participants believe they were sent to training to “get fixed” or when the content of the program is not consistent with actual company practices.

The trainer’s objective under such circumstances is to reduce the hostility. A trainer who can defuse hostile feelings can prevent them from impeding the effectiveness of the session or aggravating any organizational stress.

The best way to handle the situation is to focus the attention of the group on the real issue by asking a few well-chosen questions:

- ▶ “What issues or concerns do you have about (the subject of today’s presentation)?”
- ▶ “Why do you think the company wants you to take this training program?”

Stimulate discussion. If you appreciate the value of guided discussion as a learning technique, you probably use questions as part of that process. A question can draw out of people what they really think, in a balanced and representative fashion. That’s not true of simple statements. People may agree with a statement and remain quiet. People may disagree with a statement and argue. With questions, you can get a group to explore a subject fully—before polarization sets in and the discovery

stage of a discussion closes down.

If you tell a group of operators how they are supposed to operate their equipment, they may be more argumentative than accepting. But if you ask them about proper operating techniques, you can generate a discussion and bring out additional points on operating efficiency, quality, and safety. And everyone benefits.

Demonstrate and share knowledge. Adults have a great deal of knowledge, experience, and opinions. You may be the expert. But if you allow participants to learn from each other as well, they may enjoy their learning experience more and gain valuable insights. Asking questions of the group will enable you to create a learning experience from which everyone, including you, will benefit.

To allow trainees to demonstrate and share knowledge, you can incorporate questions into your presenta-

QUESTIONS CAN DRAW OUT WHAT PEOPLE REALLY THINK

tion or assign them questions to work on. For instance, say you are teaching a group how to fix a piece of equipment. You might ask particularly skilled group members to explain how they do it before you make your presentation. That provides an opportunity for people to be recognized for their contributions, but the trainer still has control.

By providing questions for the group to discuss, you offer people the opportunity to learn from each other as well as learn from the prepared text. For example, as part of a training session on conducting performance reviews, you might break participants into small groups and have them discuss such questions as the following:

- ▶ “Describe the most effective performance review you have ever conducted, and explain why it worked.”
- ▶ “How effective have performance reviews been in the past? Give a balanced explanation of your answer.”

Whether it’s a public seminar or

an in-house session, participants like to talk to each other. They enjoy the camaraderie, and they learn things from each other that supplement the structured presentation. It may be the one occasion for some people to get recognition for what they know.

Smooth transitions. Questions can be used to make a smooth transition from one subject to the next within the body of a training session, in the same way that they can be used at the start of one. Smooth, carefully planned transitions are especially important if there is no obvious and clear connection between the previous subject and the next one.

You can bridge the gap by asking trainees questions that link what they learned in the last section with what they will be learning in the next. One example is in the switch from teaching problem solving to teaching problem prevention. You could ask the group this: “What two problems previously worked on do you feel could have been prevented? How?”

This question links the old material to the new in a way that minimizes confusion.

Enhance learning. Questions can facilitate learning by involving the participants in the data gathering. This is particularly true when citing the results of other surveys, experiments, or studies. It is relatively easy to involve seminar participants in data-gathering processes by including an appropriate study or survey in your program, in which you ask participants about their own experiences or views. They benefit from greater understanding and can more readily identify with the results of other studies.

It is a wasted opportunity to have access to a group of people and not tap into the wealth of information and unique perspectives gathered there. If you ask the right questions, you can leave a training session having learned as much as you taught. If you ask questions of different classes over a long period of time, the information accumulates impressively, and you end up with a wealth of data for use with succeeding groups.

For example, a 30-item survey of “what motivates a supervisor” has been a very effective adjunct to a seminar about motivation. People

tend to ascribe different motives to other people than they do to themselves. When you can show group members as a whole how they responded to a survey, it is easier to get them to understand and accept other survey results.

Facilitate team building. Your session gathers a group of people who normally work together, and puts them into the same room at the same time. In other words, it's a chance to do team building. Most work groups are limited in how much meeting they can do in the course of their normal jobs. So it is important to maximize any team-building opportunity that presents itself.

Effective teams consist of individuals who are in synchrony with each other. In order for them to be in sync, they have to come together on key issues.

Let's look back at the example of a training session on employee discipline. A common problem is the lack of consistency between managers in applying discipline to employees. The best way to address that lack of consistency is to have the stakeholders agree on what they will do and how.

You can work on team building in the training session by having the participants discuss and answer such questions as this one: "What are five of the most common or most serious employee infractions that you encounter? Be specific in your description of each problem and what you think management should do in response to the infraction."

A training session is an opportunity for work groups to attack in a controlled environment the problems that confront them at work.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Ask before you tell is an effective maxim for trainers of all subjects. Properly composed questions provide an excellent forum for participants to get the most out of their interactions with each other and the trainer. And the act of asking a question shows respect for the participants that reflects back onto the trainer.

In short, questions provide a win-win experience in the classroom.

"Training 101" is edited by **Catherine M. Petrini**. Send your short articles for consideration to "Training 101," Training & Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043.

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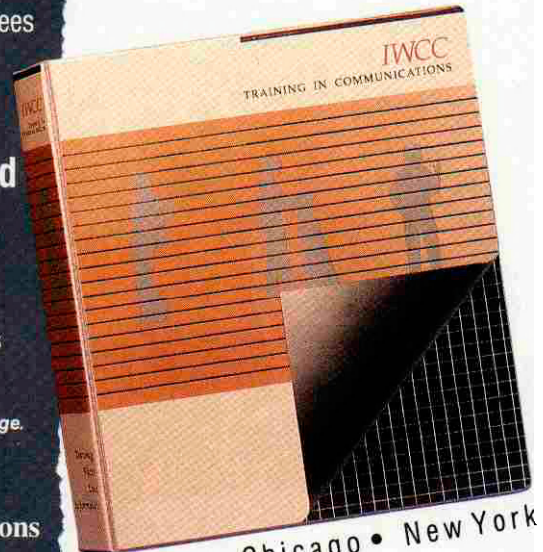
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