

The Facilitative Trainer

By PETER GIBB





Half-way through an important training seminar you're leading, a participant says: "You don't understand what it's like. I'm on the road constantly; my sales staff complains because quotas have been raised; customers are angry because the product isn't ready when they need it. I don't have time for theory!"

Somewhat annoyed, you cleverly dismiss the comment and continue. But, someone else picks up on the theme and a snowball of resistance starts to roll. Clearly, you have to do something. Thinking, "Can't they see how this will make their jobs easier?" you feel angry and defensive.

Every trainer faces such resistance, subtle or overt. How you respond—in terms of your behavior and your words—may deter-

mine the success or failure of your training session. Because your behavior at such times speaks louder than your words, your response to feedback can be even more critical than carefully prepared lectures and exercises. Your reaction will determine whether group members become alienated and drop out, or cooperate with you to work through and learn from a difficult period.

Let's examine your options for responding in such situations. How you feel and how you react depends greatly on how much responsibility you think you have for the group. For example, if you could plot your role on a spectrum of responsibility, where would you stand? (Figure 1.) This spectrum stretches from one extreme, in which the leader



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assumes all responsibility for directing the experience, through an area of shared responsibility, to the other extreme, where the group has the ultimate authority and the leader acts as the facilitator or "servant" of the group. Another way to state this is *my* agenda (trainer role), *our* agenda (trainer and the group) or *your* agenda (the group's).

Suppose you see yourself on the left, or power side of the spectrum. Your attitude is, "I'm the trainer. I know how you will learn best." In this case, you might elect to explain a key point and how it relates to what just happened, or you might even ignore the resistance and hope it goes away. For example: "What I'm showing you here is how to organize and prioritize your tasks and how to manage your time more efficiently so you accomplish those important jobs you say you can't find time for." Then, having convinced or at least quieted the questioner, you proceed as if nothing had happened.

That's one option. Another is to go to the opposite extreme, abandon your agenda and turn the time over to the group to see what happens. "Perhaps we've gotten off track. What would you like to discuss? How do you want to spend this time?"

A third and recommended option falls in the center of the spectrum. If you see your role as that of a *facilitative trainer*, you accept and legitimize the speaker's statement and verify these concerns with others in the group. For example: "So you're concerned that this won't help you with your busy and often conflicting schedule, is that it?" Temporarily, you may move to more of a facilitator or moderator role to permit group members to express themselves more. Crucial here is the attitude that the group's perception of their needs and how to meet them is equally as valid as the trainer's perception.

The facilitative trainer philosophy emerges from the work of Pfeiffer and Jones, Knowles and others. It

Figure 1.
Spectrum of Responsibility

Leaders have authority and responsibility	Leader and group share responsibility	Group has authority and responsibility
lectures, traditional theater	facilitative trainer	facilitator

recognizes that one directional imparting of knowledge is a limited view of training, and that involvement, accountability and feedback are essential elements for effective adult learning. The trainer who fails to generate positive affect, no matter how skillful or knowledgeable he or she may be, is unlikely to promote effective, relevant and retainable learning!

Whenever people come together for a task, someone (or many) explicitly or implicitly takes responsibility for what happens. If the group leader assumes this responsibility, group members usually accept what comes their way without opportunity to influence it. After the production, they may applaud or boo, but the show is over, and it was clearly the leader's show. Typical examples of this end of the spectrum are traditional theater events, lecture-type presentations and, too frequently, classroom and training sessions. There is no shared responsibility for what happens. Success or failure, glory or embarrassment—it all belongs to the leader.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the true facilitator of a task-oriented, problem-solving or planning session. As defined by Doyle and Straus (1976), this facilitator serves as a catalyst for the group's process and has no authority other than what the group agrees to give him or her. Responsibility for the success or failure of the session lies primarily with the participants who

choose to bring in a facilitator. They may also fire him or her at any point. The agenda is owned by the group.

This facilitator does not direct, but asks appropriate questions and makes process suggestions to ensure that the group's objectives are met. For example: "So you're saying that the basic purpose of the meeting is to develop a marketing strategy for the next six months. Where do you want to start? Would it help to clarify goals of the program first and then brainstorm possible ways to get there?" Unlike the trainer, this facilitator is neutral with regard to content, but suggests and/or clarifies *process* for the group. Doyle and Straus have outlined many valuable techniques for use by the facilitator.

The facilitative trainer combines tools and techniques of the traditional trainer and facilitator. He or she builds an initial agenda based on personal experience, but begins the session with joint contracting with the group around expectations, roles, responsibilities, learning styles and outcomes. This initial contract is the major prevention in dealing with resistance *before* it happens.

This short contracting process sets the stage for all that follows. It makes clear that participants *and* the trainer share responsibility for the success or failure of the session and agree to operate by the same rules and with the same desired outcome. The contract may include

reference to styles of learning and to the kinds of training formats (lecture, demo, small groups, dyads, feedback) that will be employed. It may also include any other ground rules (smoking, breaks, seating arrangements, starting and ending time, operating norms) that the group and trainer agree mutually to abide by. It should also include reference to the basic philosophical underpinning to this kind of training: there is no such thing as "teaching"; there is only learning and facilitating learning. Participants accept the responsibility for their own learning and agree to a basic training agenda. The trainer is responsible for creating an environment where learning is possible and likely and where material is readily available and understandable. However, he or she cannot force or guarantee learning.

The role of facilitative trainer is similar to the combined roles of the ground crew and the coach in a ball game. The trainer prepares the field (learning environment) and makes his or her experience available, but he or she cannot play the game for the players. You can no more command another to learn, than you can command a home run. The role is one of coaching, supporting, being available, helping, monitoring and providing accurate and timely feedback. The ultimate success or failure of the game (training session) is up to the players (trainees).

Beyond the basic learning con-

The essence of the facilitative training concept was summarized by a participant at the end of a recent training seminar: "The trainers were more concerned with our learning than their training."

tract and clear understanding of shared responsibility, what trainer activities characterize a facilitative trainer? How do you create the safe learning environment that will minimize resistance and maximize learning? A number of activities, tools and attitudes are useful complements to the definition of a facilitative trainer.

Participant expectations

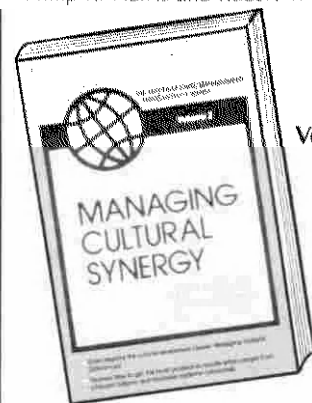
Asking participants to list their expectations is certainly nothing new to the training field. But, what happens to these expectations? The facilitative trainer records them, posts them for periodic review during the session and uses them as a checklist during training. The facilitative trainer is clear in initial response to expectations—ones which can likely be met and how, and ones which cannot be met and why. "Your expectation about specific auditing procedures is beyond the intended scope of this course. I'll try to give you some references, but I'm not prepared to address this topic." Clarifying expectations at the start sets both trainer and group up for success. Everyone is clear about course content.

The facilitative trainer can effectively take the initiative at this early stage, dealing with resistance before it happens. "I'd like each of you to list your expectations for this training seminar. . . Perhaps some of you aren't sure why you're here. Or, perhaps you're here because the boss sent you, and you'd rather not be. Since you are, take a few moments to list what you need to make this time worthwhile for you."

The more you suspect there will be resistance, the more time and care you need to spend in this kind of activity. The facilitative trainer has an important tool when he or she chooses to take the initiative, say what's going on and legitimize early resistance. Naming and dealing with resistance before it happens is a powerful act that tends to

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The facilitative trainer actively solicits feedback on the progress of the training at appropriate moments during the session and responds to it. He or she is explicit about how participants' feedback is used. For example, "At the end of yesterday's session, you told me you wanted more practice and less lecture. I've adjusted today's agenda to

include an extra hour of practice."

It is the trainer's behavior, even more than words, that participants really "hear" and remember. How responsive are you? How willing are you to adjust to participants' needs? Can you admit when you don't know the answer or are genuinely confused about the best way to proceed?

The facilitative trainer understands one of the great ironies of group process: "you get power by giving it away." As a trainer, you gain credibility and authority by admitting you don't have all the answers and by inviting and encouraging participants to share responsibility for the quality, quantity and form of their learning.

The facilitative trainer has a developed agenda for the training session, but is spontaneous in

response to participants' needs as they arise. Because no two groups are the same, even the most successful training sessions cannot be carbon copied. The facilitative trainer is willing to experiment and, as with all experiments, at times, to fail. Or, maybe it is not failure, but rather providing a different kind of learning. In this facilitative training environment, a norm is established that "there are no mistakes, there is only learning." This applies to participants and trainers alike.

The stand-up trainer's role per se is one of authority, power and ego gratification. It is a role that constantly needs to be balanced by humility, humor and perspective. A facilitative trainer must have good speaking skills, but, perhaps even more important, he or she must have good listening skills. A willingness to be open and nondefensive is crucial. *Active listening* is among the most useful tools of the trainer. Vital, too, is an attitude of respect for the learning and experience of the trainees. If the trainer sees him- or herself as "the expert" pouring knowledge into empty cups, resistance will brew.

Congruence—The key quality

Carl Rogers (1969) and others have identified *congruence* as the key quality in effective communicators. Congruence is critical to the success of the facilitative trainer. Only to the extent that he or she believes in and acts in accordance with the concepts being presented can a trainer be effective. Your attitude toward the subject, the training and the trainees, your words and your actions must all fit together in a unified pattern. The facilitative trainer is aware that his or her carefully prepared words of wisdom will soon be forgotten; trainees learn from the trainer's attitudes and behaviors. If those behaviors enforce the kind of skill-building and awareness desired, then real learning can take place.

The facilitative trainer accepts the concept that participants' ac-

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tive involvement in modification of the training design and implementation of their own learning process is essential. Roles, expectations, ground rules and operating norms are deliberately clarified and contracted between trainees and trainer at the outset. This way, the trainer deals with most resistance before it happens, and participants and trainer agree in advance to share responsibility for the training program. During the session, the trainer deliberately encourages feedback. When the facilitative trainer encounters further resistance, he or she validates participants' points of view and uses that new information in a potential reordering of the training agenda.

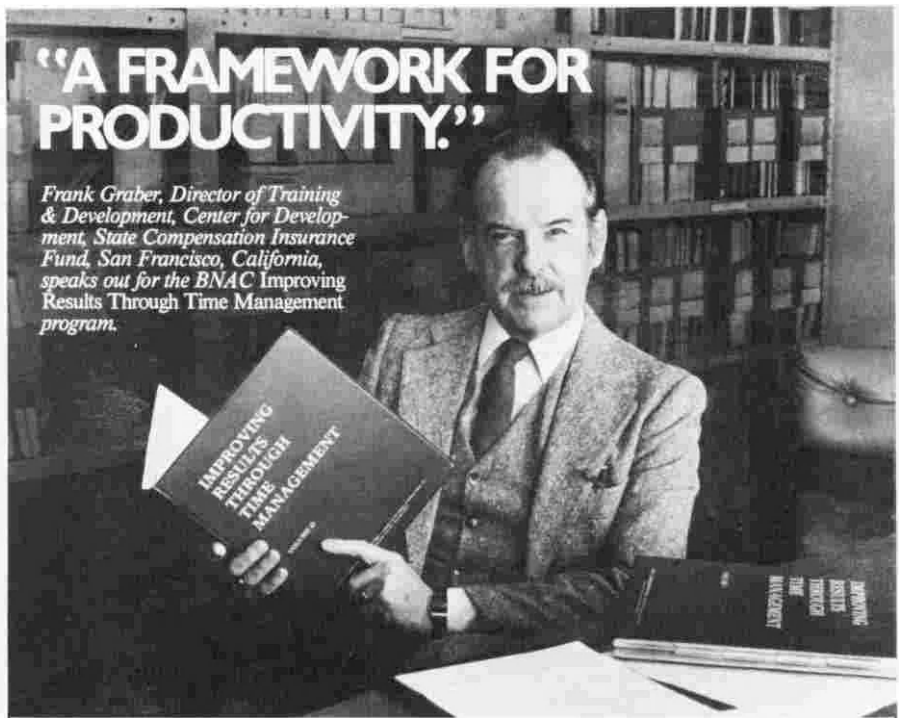
The essence of the facilitative training concept was summarized by a participant at the end of a recent training seminar: "The trainers were more concerned with our learning than their training." When participants feel this way about their training, their evaluations are less a rating of *you*, the trainer, and more a view of *us*, the learning team—trainer and trainees working together toward a mutually desired goal.

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