

# Landing a KO Punch

## Ten tips to get off on the right foot in the training ring.

By Elaine Biech

NO DOUBT, first meetings make lasting impressions. In fact, most people say that the initial 10 minutes of a meeting lay the groundwork for almost all assumptions and decisions about the ensuing relationship.

So, if first impressions are critical, how do trainers make good ones? Here's the key: Don't let them know what hit them. With a well executed opening, you can create a compelling and lasting training experience.

### A solid combination

Trainers should open with a purpose, not just open. They also should pack a mean PUNCH: promote enthusiasm, understand participant needs, note rules, clarify expectations, and help others. No matter your weight class, these tips will make you a top contender for a Training Knock Out.

**Make it conducive for learning.** The importance of creating rapport and the proper learning environment cannot be overemphasized because they help participants become open to and enthusiastic about the learning event, without getting caught off-guard. More important, you set the tone for the rest of the training session by what you accomplish at the beginning.

A trainer's opening should set the tempo of the learning: It should indicate if participants will be moving, sitting, or a combination of the two. For example, if you desire a participative climate, your opening should put people at ease—including yourself. Without a comfortable structure, participants may be reluctant to get involved. They may be shy or may not want to appear vulnerable in front of their peers.

Think thoroughly about the climate that will be the most conducive to learn-

ing. Then, begin to establish it from the moment the session begins.

**Clarify participants' expectations.** Participants count on trainers to ask about their expectations for the session, and there are numerous ways to do that. Of course, the most straightforward way is to ask. But there are other ways to get the same information. One is to twist questions to get at their concerns from a different perspective. Try some of these:

- What are your hopes and fears?
- Why are you here?
- What do you need to happen today for this to be worth your time?
- How well do your needs match the learning objectives?

It's vital that everyone understands the value of your session. Participants who understand why they are involved in training, how it will help them do their jobs better and faster, and how the content relates to them personally will get more out of the training session.

**Introduce the content.** Related to clarifying the participants' expectations is introducing the content. Provide an overview for participants by reviewing the agenda and objectives for the training session. That pours the foundation for learning and establishes a common starting point for everyone in the room.

Ensure that participants know the process of the session as well. For example, they may want to know whether they will be required to take a test, and how or if their grades will affect their jobs. They also may want to know what kind of participation will be expected and whether there will be assignments. Explain all aspects of the class as you walk them through the agenda.

**Surprise them.** Add something unconventional to send a message to participants that yours isn't the same bland

training session. You may introduce props into your opening or state something unusual or shocking about the topic (that you can prove later, of course). Also, you can start with an activity first, rather than addressing the logistics of the session.

Adding something unpredictable or teaching out of sequence introduces an element of surprise that energizes participants, adds interest and excitement to the class, and communicates that your session will be anything but boring.

**Introduce participants.** An opening isn't complete unless participants learn about their fellow classmates. Depending on the amount of time you have and how participants will need to interact during the rest of the session, choose an icebreaker or even a quick round of introductions to get the job done.

You can also help participants get acquainted by encouraging discussion that deals with attitudes, values, experience, and concerns. Before selecting how participants will meet each other, consider the kind of results needed to further the training session. What else do you want participants to know about each other?

**Learn about the group.** It may be tempting to have your nose in your notes during the icebreaker. But if you do, you may blow a great opportunity to mingle.

Take time early in the session to learn about the individuals in your group. Circulate among participants and observe how they work together. Listen to their conversations. Who seems to be taking the lead? Who is reluctant to join? What kinds of personalities exist in the group?

With that information, you can re-evaluate the rest of your design for difficulties. For example, if you had planned a dicey activity and the group appears to be risk-averse, make a mental note. While it may be too early to make changes now, at least you'll be forewarned.

# FUNDAMENTALS

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**Set ground rules.** Establishing ground rules as a part of your opening shapes the parameters of behavior for both you and your participants. Try making a verbal commitment such as, “If we start on time each day (or after each break), I guarantee we will end on time.”

As you facilitate development of these rules, be sure to delegate responsibility for them. For example, point out that participants must share the responsibility of learning. Emphasize that your role is to present content and theirs is to ask questions. Remember that you need buy-in from everyone, so you may need to modify the rules to get full agreement.

Post the ground rules in a location where everyone can see them. You may need to reference them to manage disruptions or facilitate group dynamics.

**Confront issues.** If you know issues exist about the training session, confront them during your opening and plan time to address them later.

Perhaps something happened in their organization that led to the training session. If an issue is troubling participants, allow enough time to discuss it. If you don't address challenges immediately, participants will not be able to focus on the content.

**Establish credibility and style.** Just as you want to know about your participants, they'll be trying to learn about you. Though you have a number of items to cover in the introduction, remember that the order and manner in which you cover them will convey much about you and your expectations.

Share something personal about yourself with the group. If you ask them something about themselves during an icebreaker, be sure to divulge the same information. If you have them do an activity, do it too. Taking part in your own

session ensures that you share the same information and keeps you at a similar level with your participants.

Your style also will come across in the opening—whether you want it to or not. Know that participants will be observing and making assumptions about your personality. Did you take time to listen to them and clarify your points, or did you constantly check your watch?

Credibility is a combination of what you know (expertise), what you have done (experience), and how you present yourself. Those who present themselves best come across as humbly self-confident. So, avoid having someone else introduce you. If you can't, make sure the introduction is short and appropriately related to the session.

**Take a break.** Yes, take a break! If the opening was an hour, take a breather. Breaks help maintain energy levels, give participants an opportunity for follow-up, and allow time to take care of personal needs before you get into the meat of the session.

Remember, your opening is one of the most important rounds of your training bout. Be sure it adds PUNCH to the entire design and your session will be knockout.

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