

Talking Through

Discussion Basics

By Rick Sullivan

People like to talk. The aware trainer takes advantage of that and includes opportunities to involve participants in discussions during training. Of course, we all know that some participants talk too much, while others need encouragement to open up and share their thoughts. Still others try to move the discussion off the topic. You need certain skills to lead a discussion. Here are some techniques I've learned.

A discussion is an interactive training

approach in which the participants generate much of the information and ideas. You serve as the facilitator or discussion leader and guide participants through the discussion. It might be the primary training approach you use for a session. Or you might lead a discussion by

- watching a video
- listening to a guest speaker
- answering an intriguing question
- completing a case study
- observing a role play

- brainstorming solutions.

The key is that the participants must have some prior knowledge or experience with the topic in order to enter into a discussion. When participants are familiar with the topic, the ensuing discussion can arouse interest, stimulate thinking, and encourage participation. The interaction gives you an opportunity to provide positive feedback and emphasize key points.

Planning

Like any other training approach, this one requires planning. Some discussions occur spontaneously, usually triggered by a participant's question or remark. Most of the time, however, you should plan discussions in advance. There are a number of questions to ask yourself first.

How many participants will be involved? The best discussions involve no more than 15 participants. More than that and it becomes difficult to manage the discussion and ensure that everyone is involved. When you have a larger group, you can divide it into smaller groups. That works well when you have another trainer facilitating with you; each of you can sit in with one of the groups. The alternative is for the groups to appoint their own facilitators from within, discuss the topic in their small groups, and then report to the larger group. Although that makes it more challenging to monitor the discussion, it does allow more people to participate.

What type of room are you in? The physical arrangement of the tables and chairs can help or hinder a discussion. To encourage interaction, arrange the tables in a square, circular, or U shape so that participants are able to maintain eye contact.

How much time do you have? Because of the level of participant involvement, you'll need more time for a discussion than if you were just presenting information. After deciding to use a discussion in your training, you should review the objectives, determine when the discussion will occur, prepare notes to guide the dis-

ussion, and give instructions to participants on a handout, flipchart, or screen.

It's now time to begin the discussion. As part of your introduction, state the topic, objective, and focus of the discussion. One effective way to kick off a discussion is brainstorming. For example, you could have participants discuss potential solutions to a particular problem. Brainstorming includes

- stating the topic or problem
- emphasizing all ideas are accepted
- recording the ideas on a flipchart
- asking that no idea be discussed during the brainstorming.

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Leading

One of the most critical steps in leading a discussion is to shift the focus to the participants. To bring them into the discussion, ask a question. It can be an open question for anyone or targeted to a specific participant. For example, once you finish brainstorming, ask someone to elaborate on one of the ideas that came up. As that person begins to respond, sit down with the participants. Taking a seat at the table removes you from the authority role and places you at the same level as the participants. That will help encourage interaction.

Try to limit your role during the discussion to encouraging participant involvement. That may mean asking a participant to react to comments made by someone else or asking a participant for an opinion on the topic. Observe all of the participants, and try to encourage total participation. More often than not, quiet participants turn out to provide

some of the best input.

From time to time in almost any discussion, it will be necessary to intercede or act as a referee. You want some level of disagreement, as that's an important ingredient in a good discussion. But when participants become emotional or upset, you may need to step in. Knowing when and how to deal with such situations takes a skillful facilitator. To regain control of the discussion, follow these steps:

1. Stand up; that will bring the focus back to you.
2. Thank participants for their input.
3. Try to clarify both sides of the argu-

ment or debate.

4. Remind participants of the focus of the discussion.
5. Direct a question to a participant who wasn't involved in the previous interactions.
6. Sit down.

When a discussion seems to slow down or participants appear to be losing focus, you may want to step in and summarize the key points thus far. You might need to do that periodically to give participants a chance to refocus their thinking.

When you've been a participant, have you ever tried to get your trainer off the topic? We all have. That happens when participants are bored with the topic or session. Because participant involvement is critical, there's a good chance that the discussion will drift from the topic when you aren't careful. When you see that happening, ask a participant how a comment relates to the topic, remind the group of the focus, or stand up and bring the focus back

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to you for a quick summary. Then shift the discussion back to the participants.

How many times has one participant tried to monopolize a discussion? When that happens, people's eyes roll. You must make sure that one or two participants don't dominate. Whenever you see that occurring, try to bring other participants into the discussion. If necessary, interrupt anyone talking too much, thank him or her, and draw in someone new.

Summarizing

When is a discussion over? That depends on the purpose. Some discussions may need to continue until you find a solution to a problem or until the group reaches consensus on an issue. Other discussions may continue for as long as time permits.

When it's time to summarize, stand up

to bring the focus back to you and then highlight the key points. Alternatively, one of the participants can present the summary. Regardless of who does the summary, it's important that it link to the original goal or purpose.

I've learned that a discussion is a highly effective training approach. When the topic is appropriate, the number of participants is manageable, enough time is available, and you use effective facilitation techniques, a discussion can engage participants and bring them rapidly into the heart of your training.

Rick Sullivan is director of learning and performance support, JHPIEGO Corporation, Baltimore, Maryland; rsullivan@jhpiego.net. Send short, how-to articles on training basics

Quick Tips for Success

- Select the right topic.
- Arrange the room appropriately.
- Have notes to guide you.
- Allow enough time.
- Involve all participants.
- Provide positive feedback.
- Keep the discussion on track.

to Fundamentals, T+D, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043. Email fundamentals@astd.org.