

# How Master Trainers Get That Way

Acknowledged masters in any art or craft achieve the highest possible levels of performance. Here, two seasoned HRD professionals discuss the importance of learning the behaviors associated with master trainers.

By DUGAN LAIRD and FORREST BELCHER

Film has its Bogarts and Bergmans; music, its Ellingtons and Bernsteins; baseball, its Ruths and DiMaggios. All these have been acknowledged masters, significantly superior to other, more pedestrian performers. What makes them so special? Is it genius or hard work? Inspiration or concentration? Talent or technique?

We may ask the same about instructors. What make truly great instructors so masterful? The question itself offers the key to its answer: It is, indeed, something masters *do*. After many years of observing both the ordinary and the masterful, we have seen that the really great ones use some special skills. It is heartening that these special skills are learnable, and are thus available to all who actively seek excellence in the class or conference room.

---

*Dugan Laird has been a training and development consultant and writer since 1970, when he left United Air Lines after 18 years of instructing, designing and managing training programs. A monthly columnist in Training Magazine, he now writes for Training News and is the author of books such as Approaches To Training and Development, and with Ruth House, Training Today's Employees and Interactive Classroom Instruction.*

*Forrest Belcher manages MEGA Consultants, Inc., and is a former president of the American Society for Training and Development. He was for many years director of training and development for Standard Oil Company of Indiana, and received ASTD's Gordon Bliss Memorial Award for his outstanding contributions to the association and the profession. He is founder and chairman of The Whitney Group, a think tank for experienced HRD practitioners.*

## Accepting difference

Above all, master trainers express their belief in the student's ability to achieve. They agree with Carl Rogers that, "Humans have a natural potentiality for learning. They are curious about their world" (*Freedom To Learn*, p. 157). Thus, they also allow students to learn in different ways. When instructors do just these two basic things, they become facilitators rather than mere directors of a learning experience.

Anyone can achieve these key behaviors by honest analysis of one's own experience as a learner or teacher: "What was the hardest lesson I ever learned? Well, I learned it, didn't I? What other things have I never yet learned? I haven't given up, now have I? I can indeed learn new things. I can indeed grow!"

Great instructors nourish individual differences. It's true that they seek to produce standard behaviors for on-the-job application, but they help learners travel different paths in acquiring that standard

dividual learning styles, knowing that there are many ways to achieve any learning goal.

## Using silence

During these various activities, they provide silent time for the emergence of human potential, allowing learners to generate new personal insights that lead to new behaviors. Why is silence so important? Because the learners' minds need to analyze, assimilate, evaluate and resolve. Parents who tell their children to go to their rooms and think about what they have learned from an experience are practicing a very important phase of any learning cycle. Actors in the famed Moscow Art Theatre were told: "The pause is the mind's measurement of thought." That applies just as much to learning as it does to acting.

These silences are deliberate, timed to follow critical moments in the learning curve. They might come after role plays or moments of excruciating emotion.

**Masters may make errors in design and execution, but they accept all classroom events as learning events.**

performance. And, they let each find personal expression in the performance of the standard task. During the learning they tell some and show others, they graduate some early and keep others for retraining. They counsel a lot during coffee breaks, but never deprive anyone of that critical information. They match methods of course objectives and in-

They are part of, not lapses in, the learning process.

A brief silence follows every question so learners can organize thoughtful responses. Master instructors spend a lot of time asking questions. They understand that learning has to happen within the learner and that brilliant questions trigger it. So masters seldom say things

they can get learners to say for them. But when they *do* say things, they say them loudly enough to be heard and clearly enough to be understood. They put platform skills in proper perspective. They respect the power of sight; their visual aids clarify and intensify. Single-message pictures—not mere lists of words—are integral items in the tool kits they carry into classrooms.

And they listen! They listen for both the emotion and content in the answers to their questions. They hear the sighs and the sound of fidgeting, the laughter and the “aha” of recognition when a trainee understands a point. When students react negatively, master trainers deal with it constructively. They treat dissidence and dissonance as honest assets rather than as obstacles.

### Knowing when you don't know

As true masters, they know that they don't know everything about everything—and they admit it. They are naturally aware of and curious about the several sides of every issue. They may

know more about an assigned topic than any single student, but since real learning requires learners to invest their own experience, beliefs and values, the instructor knows a lot less than all the students combined. Clearly, the trainer knows less about those private motives and values students must invest to produce the cycle of understanding, acceptance, resolution and application that leads to lasting behavior change. Therefore, “I don't know” might be the only correct answer to a student inquiry. “What do *you* think?” is a rich follow-up. Great trainers often say things like, “Let's see. How might we find out?” and “What could we do together to discover the answer?”

This ability to admit ignorance implies that masters can laugh at lots of things, including themselves, and that they do so frequently. Far from being stand-up comics, however, they merely respond to the awkwardness, the absurdity and the honest errors engendered during any change process. Their humor is warm, affirmative, affectionate. The humor is informed by the knowledge that the world has somehow survived without the

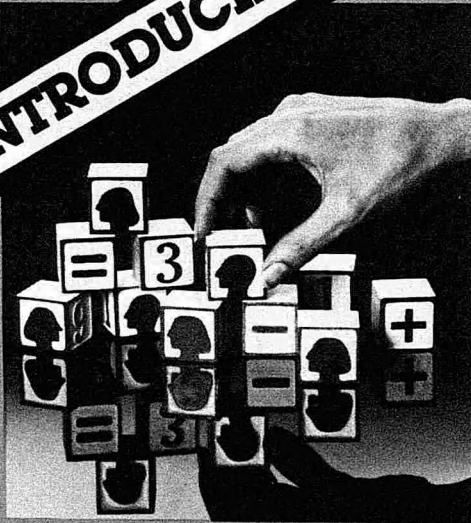
wonderful new skills teacher and learner are engaged in acquiring.

All masterful trainers secure and provide frequent feedback. They know how important this is to the learning process, how it fulfills the need for recognition deep in all of us. They know how much they need feedback themselves, so from time to time they ask, “How are we doing?” At another level they ask, “How are we feeling about what we are doing?” Malcolm Knowles observes that “very few cold fish make good instructors.” Kohl explains that “A teacher has as much right to be angry, frustrated, impatient, distrustful as the students and should let them know that. Only when a teacher emerges as another person in the classroom can a free environment based on respect and trust evolve” (*The Open Classroom*, p. 81).

Because instructors are human beings, they naturally respond to all feedback. The masters respond in certain ways. They positively reinforce each step the learner takes toward the learning goal; they help learners recognize and feel good about what has been achieved; they help

Visit us at ASTD Booth No. 325.

Circle No. 113 on Reader Service Card




**INTRODUCING!**

# Performance Based Interviewing™

**ALREADY CHANGING THE WAY ORGANIZATIONS TRAIN THEIR PEOPLE TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS!**

GENERAL MOTORS, COCA-COLA, CROCKER BANK, CIBA-GEIGY, FORD MOTOR, HART SCHAFFNER & MARX, ATLANTIC BANK ...

... The list keeps growing and for good reasons! PBI offers for the first time a new and systematic approach to traditional job interviewing. PBI is a total training program featuring the use of “mini-simulations” during the interview itself — a state-of-the-art advancement that dramatically increases the likelihood that the right person will be selected for the right job. Write or call: Program Director, (305) 898-9219, Assessment Designs, Inc., 601 North Ferncreek Avenue, Orlando, Florida 32803-4890, for more information.



**ASSESSMENT  
DESIGNS, INC.**  
“Avenues to excellence in human resource management”



them see how to remove any remaining shortcoming; they help them want to do so.

### Cultivating variety

Thus, the masters use a variety of interactive methods. And they do not regard "methods" as a dirty word. Just as skilled surgeons select the appropriate instruments and procedures, master instructors know when to use the tools of their profession: cases, role plays (in several formats), computer-assisted or programmed instruction or any of several dozen methods.

Through this variety, they keep the process moving. Rapidity is part of the process of stimulation. In master classes, things don't drag. Instructor-driven segments are brisk. Interactive activities provide time for one-on-one counseling with anyone who needs a bit more time or repetition.

Even the masters may make errors in design and execution, but they accept all classroom events as learning events. Does the case study fall flat? The masters deal with this issue with the class itself. Do participants sulk because they expected a lecture on conflict resolution and resent another style of presentation? Masters know how to deal with this very conflict as the substance of their assigned topic. The point is that they learn from negative experience. Every top-flight instructor uses negative feedback as insights into his or her own behavior. Who can say that unplanned learning is less useful than what was originally intended? That spontaneous insights are less appropriate than those originally intended in our "unsuccessful" lesson plans?


### Endurance and openness

All these instructor behaviors involve a lot of energy. But the masters go with the energy of the group, even when their own physical and psychic energies might nearly be spent. They endure long hours and days punctuated by psychic, intellectual and physical highs and lows. It is exhausting and exhilarating! The most fatiguing exercises of all include following a group's interest in one direction when the lesson plan clearly points in another; working to find why a group has no energy for a planned activity; or staying an hour late to respond to the intense desire one student might have for an insight that seems hackneyed to the trainer, but is new to the learner.

Now the lovely thing about all these behaviors is their eminent attainability. They say that great actors are often eager

for more rehearsal, even after a show has been running for months. They can always devise a better way to read a line or play a scene. So, too, with master instructors. After a rousingly great day, one hears them say, "Next time, I'll introduce the case study *before* the break," or "Anna taught me a great lesson today!" By practicing their mastery techniques, these great instructors keep growing. They learn so much from each student that

they epitomize what Rogers calls an "openness to experience."

Perhaps this openness to experience is the sum of all the characteristics we have observed in great trainers. Perhaps it is a distinct attitude found in true professionals in any field. However we classify it, whatever priority we assign to it, this professionalism can be learned. The knowledge is available for those who wish to achieve excellence as trainers. 



# LEFT OUT.

*Not anymore.*

*Now you can include everyone.*

Joy Riggs and Associates offers INCREASING PERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS™ to help you meet the unique training needs of office support employees and technical professionals.

IBM, Caterpillar, ARCO, DuPont, Liberty Mutual, and Federal Reserve Bank are just a few of the companies using INCREASING PERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS™ and getting results. Results like improved supervisor-employee communication, increased employee output, more professional

behaviors and cooperation among co-workers.

INCREASING PERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS™ is a flexible, six-module program that teaches the "how-to's" of:

- Team effectiveness
- Communication skills
- Self-management

*Let Joy Riggs and Associates put this dynamic employee development program in your hands today. Write or call for information and a free overview videotape.*



**JOY RIGGS AND ASSOCIATES**  
**HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT**

TWO NORTH PARK PLACE • SUITE 206 • KINGWOOD, TEXAS 77339 • (713) 358-3686

Visit us at ASTD Booth No. 818.

Circle No. 166 on Reader Service Card