Training 101

F O U R   G H O S T S   A N D   T W O   H E A D S

Is your training room haunted? Probably. Many training programs are visited—and disrupted—by the "ghosts" of participants' past training experiences, work histories, time demands, and personal needs.

In the first article below, "ghostbusters" Mike Laus and David Champagne offer some clues for identifying four kinds of training-room ghosts and describe an intervention for exorcising the poltergeists from your classroom.

In the second article, Glen Plutschak and Bob Luke discuss the benefits of team training; that is, training as part of a team. Trainers who work in pairs add variety to a training session—trainees benefit from their differing backgrounds, perspectives, expertise, and training styles. The trainers benefit too—they learn from each other as they share the responsibility for conducting a session.

The authors describe five basic rules to keep in mind when training by the buddy system.

Ghosts in the Training Room

Randy is sitting in the third row. He is one of more than 15 million American employees participating in training sponsored by their companies this year. He is surrounded by 24 other trainees.

In his mind, Randy is questioning the value of the forthcoming training. Others in the classroom also have doubts. Some feel hostile about being here. Some are sure they already know most of what will be taught. Others expect that the training will solve all their problems. Some feel that the ideas to be presented may be good, but that they won't work for them because of their special work circumstances. Some are convinced that the ideas presented will be "way up in the clouds" and impractical for them.

Randy, in particular, is feeling stress. He feels a lot of work-related pressure. His teenage son's behavior has been getting on his nerves. He has a lot of things on his mind and thinks he is too busy this week to sit in a classroom all day. Besides, his past classroom experiences have been unsatisfying.

The same "ghosts" lurk in the shadows of many training rooms: the ghosts of classroom history, of work history, of time and life demands, and of personal needs. The ghosts have a lot of influence; they can actually help determine whether the time, effort, and money put into training programs pay off.

The dictionary defines a ghost as "a returning or haunting memory or image." Ghosts help define a reality that a person perceives as true. A training participant's personal ghosts are based on a vast collection of

Raise spirits in your classroom with a ghostbusting intervention and five tips for training by the "buddy system."

experiences that influence his or her response to the new training experience. Assumptions and perceptions of reality guide behavior, so trainees' ghosts can affect their behavior in the classroom.

A training participant's state of mind in approaching training can determine how much he or she will benefit from the event. Before a session begins, trainees may decide that it is exactly what is needed and may focus all their energy toward it. Or they may have a strong conviction that they will learn nothing in the class, and respond by "tuning out." Each individual's appraisal is based on the personal ghosts he or she carries into the training experience.

Let's explore four different categories of training ghosts.

Ghosts of Classroom History. Adults carry many memories and strong feelings about classroom experiences in the past. An adult's classroom memories include those from childhood and adolescence, from college days, and from continuing education programs. Such memories affect the ways in which different people approach the classroom experience.

Some adults approach education and training programs with anxiety and ambivalence. This attitude can stem from learning situations that have been anxiety-provoking experiences. These people view the classroom as a threatening environment. In their minds, "surviving" the experience requires maintaining a low profile.

Many adults view learning as a passive process. They believe that the instructor, as the only source of information and knowledge in a classroom, is totally responsible for ensuring learning. Others see the classroom as a place where boring, trivial, or irrelevant things occur—or where old ideas and issues are rehashed. All of these attitudes grow out of memories of unsatisfactory classroom experiences.

Ghosts of Work History. Each adult in a training session is likely to have a long and varied history of work in a variety of organizations. Members of a training class may have experienced work cultures that had varying degrees of openness to training and new ideas. For example, some work settings expect new knowledge and skills to be used immediately; others see no link between business needs and training and have little interest in applying learning.

Some adults cling to the view that their own work situations are so unique that classroom learning is not applicable to "the real world" for them. Others believe that training offers little to those who are already successful at work. Some adults have been part of work cultures that use training as a punishment for poor performance; they are likely to see training attendance as rehabilitation.

Other adult learners feel at risk in their careers. Because of past experiences, they are anxious about keeping up with changes in their fields and are concerned about falling behind and being replaced. Those concerns also influence their attitudes toward a training class.

Ghosts of Time and Life Demands. Adults enter the training setting with multiple roles and responsibilities. They have many demands on their time, numerous preoccupations, and a wide variety of commitments. Many people, situations, and issues are constantly competing for their attention and time.

Adult learners are not primarily students. They are businesspeople, homemakers, parents, community volunteers, and professionals. They may fill a host of other roles as well.

Many adults feel divided into pieces—with several of the pieces elsewhere. As a result, they enter a training session already "stressed out" and preoccupied. They may have difficulty focusing on the training. They may have to be reminded that it is possible to concentrate solely on training during a session, completing work-related activities by telephone during breaks.

Ghosts of Personal Needs. To some extent, this category of ghosts overlaps the other three, but some personal needs fall outside the boundaries of the previous categories. Such needs can distract trainees from learning, by blocking the energy and concentration required in training classrooms.

Some personal needs relate to feelings about becoming involved with a new group of people—the training group.

Some people feel entirely comfortable and secure about learning

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Things That Go Bump in the Classroom

Here are some examples of each of the four kinds of "ghosts" that haunt typical training rooms.

Classroom History

▶ Learning is a passive process; responsibility for the outcome lies with the instructor.

▶ The classroom presents a threatening situation in which survival is a major issue.

▶ The classroom is a place where boring, trivial, or irrelevant things occur.

▶ The teacher is the only source of learning in a classroom.

Work History

▶ Training offers little to participants who are already successful at work.

▶ The employee's work situation is so unique that classroom learning is not applicable.

▶ Training is a punishment or a remedial activity for dysfunctional people.

▶ Learning outcomes are not applied in people's work settings.

Time and Life Demands

▶ Participants enter training feeling stressed and preoccupied with work-related projects; they have difficulty focusing on training experiences.

▶ Participants are distracted by concerns about friends and family members.

▶ Colleagues can't be trusted to manage work activities adequately while participants are in training.

Personal Needs

▶ Being a member of an unfamiliar group will make this experience uncomfortable.

▶ Training provides a setting for impressing everyone, which may lead to job offers.

▶ The training environment provides an opportunity to find a mate.

▶ Training experiences reveal personal inadequacies.

with a group of strangers or co-workers. Others feel anxious about getting involved with large or small groups. Some adult learners have strong needs for affection, caring, and support; they may need affirmation from trainers or fellow trainees. Some will be more intent on forming relationships than they are about reaching training objectives. Others may divert energy in a session toward the personal need to make an impression on the group.

Anxiety about adequacy is another source of stress. Many adults harbor doubts about their ability to learn. Such doubts can affect their receptiveness to learning, their approach to the session, and their willingness to take part in some training activities.

Exorcism: A Ghostbuster. An "exorcism" early in a training session can provide an opportunity for participants to examine and discuss their own ghosts. It should occur immediately after review of the training objectives.

The exorcism, or "ghostbuster," should be introduced as a way for participants to take personal responsibility for the success of the forthcoming training experience. The ghostbuster can replace or supplement a traditional icebreaker as a way of addressing participant questions and concerns.

The intervention can take the form of a lecture, discussion, or role play, or can be a combination of the three, to allow participants an opportunity for introspection and discussion.

A 20-minute ghostbusting segment should be enough for most half-day or day-long training experiences. If you sense real hostility toward the training, or higher-than-usual tension levels, you may want to spend more time on further discussion or probe for specific problems. In longer training courses, you may want to identify specific ghosts and their sources. This can be done in small groups, in which participants identify ghosts and discuss strategies for putting them to rest, at least for the time of the training.

Deliberate attention to classroom ghosts can transform a training group from a loosely knit collection of strangers to a supportive learning community. Surfacing ghosts is an honest and candid way to help adults become conscious about their training behavior. And exorcising classroom ghosts can help the trainer learn enough about trainees to plan more effective learning experiences for the participants, both within the workshop and back on the job.

Ghostbusting gives training participants the chance to discuss openly what most of them are already thinking. They learn a safe, nonjudgmental vocabulary they can use to monitor and manage their own behavior and to understand the motivations of group members whose behavior may be interfering with everyone's learning. Once ghosts in the training room have been identified, understood, and appropriately managed, training participants can concentrate instead on successful learning.

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Training in Tandem

Sure, two heads are better than one, but there's more to team training than that.

Two trainers add variety to a training session. Participants come to programs with various learning styles. Variety in trainer style, expertise, background, and experience—as well as variety in methods and settings—boosts their interest and involvement.

Training as part of a team can also be beneficial to trainers. New trainers can learn techniques and skills from veteran trainers where it counts—in the classroom. New trainers can also lean on the vets for emotional support and confidence-building. And trainers at all experience levels can benefit from on-line observations provided by experienced colleagues; such feedback can be an invaluable aid to self-improvement. Also, fatigue, stress, anxiety, and burnout are reduced when two trainers share the load, allowing both trainers to be more vigorous and empathetic.

Besides, it can be lonely going it alone. Triumphs are more meaningful when celebrated with a partner.

Five rules for team trainers. The fundamentals of good training apply to team training as well. Here are some points to keep in mind when you're training with a partner:
- Plan ahead.
- Know each partner's strengths.
- Stay involved, even when it's not your turn to train.
- Practice transitions.
- Know when to disagree.

Planning ahead is the key to success. Know what you are responsible for and what your partner will handle. Murphy's Law is no stranger to classrooms. Trainers get sick, miss planes, and get caught in traffic. Be ready to do the entire session by yourself, if necessary.

Who brings the flipcharts? Who makes them? What about overheads,

Dynamic Duos: Pairing Up Trainers and Nontrainers

Who's on your training team? Many training duos don't consist of two full-time trainers.

For in-house training, consider recruiting an experienced employee to be your training partner. Many companies are using senior employees more and more often in training sessions, in tandem with outside consultants or in-house trainers. Employee/trainers add realism, prestige, and credibility to a full-time trainer's expertise. Companies are using them in management development as well as technical training.

Involvement in training broadens employees' perspectives. In addition, being selected to train can be a good shot in the arm for employees. Employee/trainers, as well as training participants, may be more enthusiastic about applying the classroom concepts when they get back to their offices.

handouts, and manuals? How about room setup? Some trainers like semicircular seating arrangements; others prefer horseshoes, clusters, tables, or rows. Reach agreement with your partner beforehand and set up the room together.

Know your strengths. If you're strong in a particular area of the training, admit it. Good training teams not only conduct a strength-and-weakness assessment before each training session, but also monitor changes in each trainer's skill repertoire after each training activity.

Stay involved. This is team training, not alternating virtuoso performances at the Lincoln Center. Call on your partner to reinforce a particular point that is within his or her exper-tise. Have a question? Ask the participants or your partner.

Do not leave the room when your partner is "on." That is rude and unprofessional. Stay up front, in the center, or wherever you both happen to be working. Be visible even if you're not training. You are part of the group. Participants will notice if you work on something else while your partner trains. They'll think you aren't prepared or aren't paying attention. They would be correct on both counts.

Practice transitions. Know where your part ends and your partner's part begins. Make your transitions smooth by explaining to trainees how your partner's session builds on what you have just done. Watch the clock; don't jeopardize your partner's success by going over your time limit. And don't jeopardize the team's success by infringing on participants' lunch, break, or adjournment time.

Know when to disagree. Should you and your partner disagree in front of the class? If it's to correct a minor error or offer a slightly different perspective, go right ahead. But too many disagreements in front of your participants are bad business. This is a training session, not cross fire. Work your differences out over the phone, at the office, at the bar, at lunch, on break, or after the session. Avoid airing them during the session.
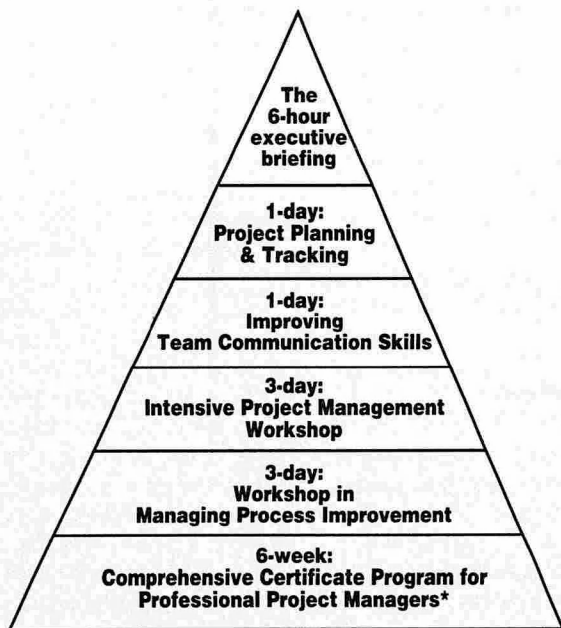
Teaming up for success. Team training has many benefits for the trainers and the participants. It also has its rules; success is not automatic. Effective team training requires planning, cooperation, and constant communication.

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