

# Tying Ourselves in Knots

Those tough-to-admit-to, tough-to-confront, tough-to-get-a-grip-on interpersonal knots we develop during work are common (believe it or not) and can be good for us (it's true!).

By BEVERLY KAYE and BETSY JACOBSON

**W**e trainers often seem to be all things to all people. We are teachers, coaches, counselors, consultants, managers, curriculum designers, audiovisual engineers, entertainers, and more. Whatever the role of the day (or hour!), we're sure to find a book that can help develop the skill needed. But how many train-the-trainer programs or texts cover our human concerns—the ones that crop up while we're performing our professional roles?

Such concerns range from internal self-doubts and regrets to external differences with colleagues and clients. We don't often discuss these issues or directly confront others who might be involved; and these issues are rarely addressed in trainers' references or programs. Nevertheless, most of us struggle plenty with our feelings of self-esteem, competition, control, and conflict.

These struggles stem from three types of tensions: twits, nits, and snits. A *twit* is that frustrating mental state we develop when we're angry or displeased with ourselves or our work. Here's when we ask ourselves such things as "Why am I taking this so seriously?"

A *nit* is the state we get in during aggravating encounters with other individuals, such as cotrainers, supervisors, clients, or participants. These encounters amount to unspoken or unresolved con-

flicts: "But you said *you* would bring the overheads" or "It's a *four*-day program; it will lose something if we only have one day."

Different from the *twit* and the *nit* is the *snit*, which stems from unsettling circumstances with a group. This state evolves from mismatched personalities, expectations, or timing or other problems between a trainer and a roomful of people. Such mismatches can occur with clients, colleagues, or class participants who, for example, may insist they have no conflicts while you're trying to convince them they do.

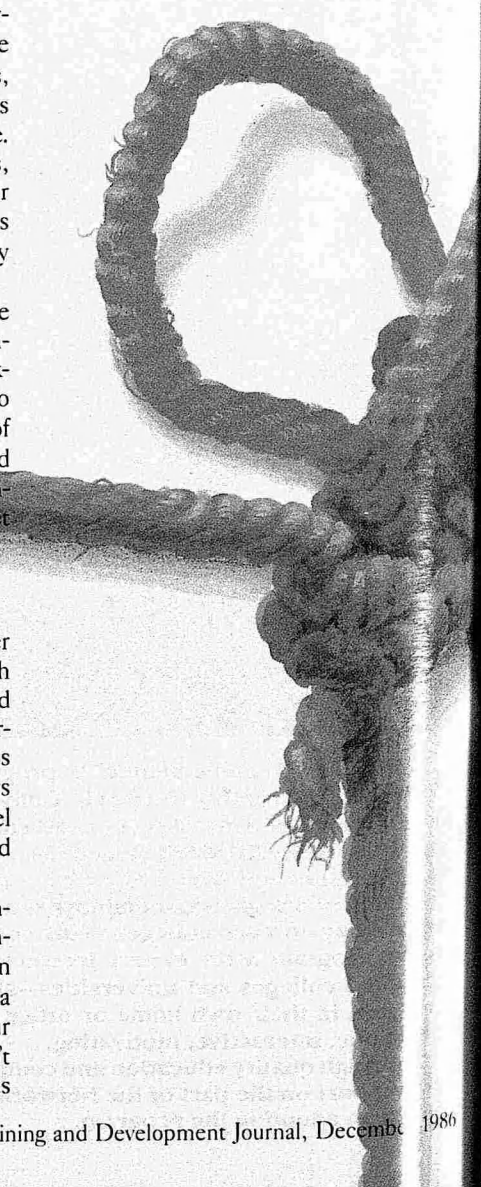
The *twit*, *nit*, and *snit* categories are useful for taking stock of what's happening when we think things just aren't working out. Using the categories as a guide to examining the human and personal side of work, we can better confront—and sometimes even resolve—nagging concerns before they cripple our ability to get the job done.

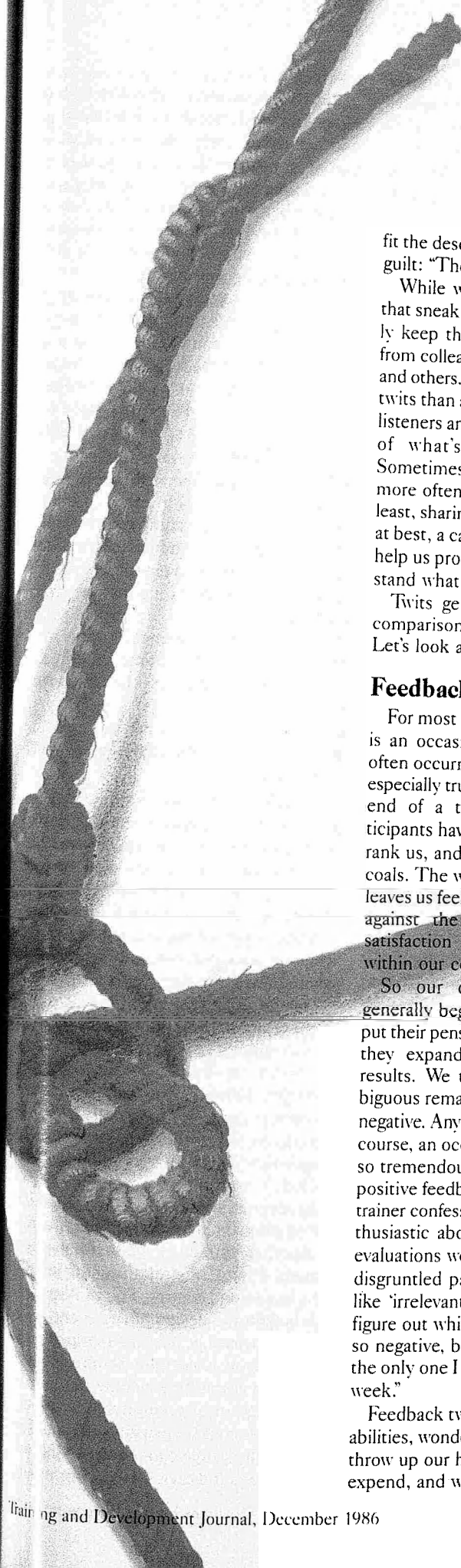
## A tale of three twits

Although *twits* come from our "inner voices" and do not involve interaction with others, they ring out as loudly and repetitively as the demands of an overbearing boss. Some *twits* stay with us throughout our professional lives; others come and go depending on how we feel about our work, our organizations, and ourselves.

When we feel isolated and lonely, our inner voices work overtime to keep us company. *Twits*—especially those that deal in self-doubt and personal rebuke—are a natural result of this situation. Our thoughts begin with either "I shouldn't have" or "I wish I had" this or that. *Twits*

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fit the description Erma Bombeck gave to guilt: "The gift that keeps on giving."

While we can't really ignore the twits that sneak into our thoughts, we frequently keep them to ourselves, hiding them from colleagues, training groups, spouses, and others. (Bartenders claim to hear more twits than anyone, but these sympathetic listeners are really only party to a fraction of what's involved in each twit.) Sometimes twit suppression is smart; more often than not, it isn't. At the very least, sharing a twit can be a catharsis; and at best, a caring and objective person can help us productively confront and understand what our inner voices are saying.

Twits generally stem from feedback, comparison, or thoughts about image. Let's look at each type.

### Feedback twits

For most trainers, participant feedback is an occasion for agony and ecstasy—often occurring at the same time. This is especially true of written evaluations at the end of a training session, when participants have the opportunity to rate us, rank us, and sometimes rake us over the coals. The whole idea of being evaluated leaves us feeling exposed and defenseless against the whims of people whose satisfaction might not be completely within our control.

So our concerns about feedback generally begin even before participants put their pens to the evaluation forms, and they expand when we mull over the results. We tend to interpret even ambiguous remarks and spaces left blank as negative. Any actual negative remark is, of course, an occasion to send us into a twit so tremendous that we're blind to all the positive feedback we've received. Once a trainer confessed, "The group seemed enthusiastic about the workshop, and the evaluations were superb—except for one disgruntled participant who used words like 'irrelevant' and 'boring.' I never did figure out which of the 20 managers was so negative, but his or her response was the only one I could focus on for the next week."

Feedback twits lead us to question our abilities, wonder if all our work is worth it, throw up our hands about the energy we expend, and worry whether we'll ever be

hired by that client again. We typically—and usually unsuccessfully—try to steel ourselves against these twits by thinking "I did the best possible job I could," "They're just angry because they were required to be there," "What do participants know anyway?" or "She's always had a chip on her shoulder."

Still, we work up a twit when we see one or two "average" ratings or comments such as "didn't meet my expectations" and "didn't learn anything new." Even comments about the color (or lack of it) used in a transparency or the absence of three-hole punches in a handout can leave us harboring doubts and defenses.

Sometimes our feedback to ourselves can put us in a twit. Even without participant evaluations to drive us on, many of us easily develop a mindset that says "I should have said" or "I wish I had included" something or other. Since perfection is elusive in any given training event, we have plenty of opportunity afterwards to give ourselves swift mental kicks.

In its worst state, the feedback twit spirals beyond the situation and feedback where it began. We often see one negative comment as a negative evaluation from that participant; we feel like one negative evaluation is a failed event; and, more dramatically, we see one failed event as a commentary on our whole career. We begin wondering whether we're current enough in our knowledge or quick enough on our feet to be in training in the first place.

### Comparison twits

Comparison twits can develop without feedback and even without the background of a specific training session. We see other trainers in action, and they always seem more dynamic. We notice their strengths and ignore their weaknesses—especially if their strengths are in areas we'd like to improve. With comparisons, we usually are so busy berating ourselves that we fail to use talented colleagues as beneficial role models.

Comparison twits generally occur in the areas of design and delivery. We see an innovative, exciting design for training and wonder why we didn't think of that. From there, we make the leap to "My designs

just aren't as good as" so-and-so's. Often we don't even bother to inquire whether the design actually succeeded when put into practice.

In the area of delivery, we give high marks to trainers for enthusiasm, entertainment ability, and demonstrated knowledge of subject matter. But we may not even question what the participants learned or whether objectives were met. An example of this limited thinking is the following statement by one trainer: "I know if Joan or Peter from my office were demonstrating this communications model, they'd somehow make it really seem new and exciting. But I just can't seem to make participants enthusiastic about it."

Comparison twits also can occur outside a specific training event when we pit our general professional worth against what another person is accomplishing. This is especially common in the areas of publicity and visibility. It always seems that "she published more" or "he got better preworkshop publicity." And who hasn't at

Typical comments by trainers suffering image twits are "Why did I accept this speech when I knew it would be all grief and no pay?," "If I have to teach this one more time, I'll die," and "I can't believe they want the same design I was presenting seven years ago."

The work of a trainer is varied at best and precarious at worst. Given that reality, it is only natural that we find ourselves in professional situations that don't live up to self-images.

### The nature of a nit

Nits, those real or imagined problems that occur between two individuals, may arise from jealousy, power struggles, broken promises, miscommunication, unrealistic expectations, or other everyday occurrences between two people working together. Nits usually develop at the most inopportune moments, when stress and pressure to get on with the job are particularly intense. Rather than resolve the conflicts, we tend to push on with the task; but their presence just makes the task that

together.

But this arrangement also has built-in difficulties. Styles, abilities, expectations, and needs are rarely the same or equal among any two professionals, so it takes a lot of time to develop a good cotraining relationship. We know we should discuss these items beforehand, but we don't because we get so caught up in planning and conducting the training.

Here's what happened with one set of trainers: "We were cotrainers for a series of six three-day seminars, and right down to the last day of the last session, he was still interrupting me to add entertaining anecdotes from his own experience."

Does this sound familiar? How about these cotraining nits:

- "He didn't do a fair share of the prework detail."
- "She tried to take complete control."
- "He corrected me in front of the class."
- "She used my favorite story."
- "He played to the group instead of the learning objectives."
- "She ignored the agenda."
- "He threw us off our time schedule."
- "She didn't process the exercises enough."
- "He preempted my next lecture."
- "She wasn't as prepared as she should have been."

In addition to the notable problems that occur during sessions, there are issues that continue outside the training event. Jealousy is just such an issue, along with its close relative, competition. Jealousy and competition are natural in any peer working relationship, but even more so when the peers are in front of an audience where they can easily vie for attention.

Jealousy issues raised during a training event center on who is more entertaining, who "captures" the group, who always seems to get to deliver the really interesting stuff, and who gets participants to interact more. Jealousy continues outside the session as the cotrainers watch for reactions: Which one of them is buttonholed more often for questions by participants out in the corridor? And who is being offered participant business cards?

Another cotraining nit that can occur before, during, or after a training session revolves around control. The conflict often starts with the design of the event, a difficult endeavor at best for two people to undertake. It is not uncommon for each trainer to attempt to include material he or she feels most comfortable with—and maybe can even shine with—in front of the group. The struggle for control continues as decisions and divisions of labor

## Even comments about the color used in a transparency or the absence of three-hole punches in a handout can leave us harboring doubts and defenses

some time questioned "Why wasn't I asked to serve on that task force?" or "Why didn't they invite me to chair a panel at that conference?"

One reason the comparison twit is so pervasive is that nobody is ever perfect in every aspect of the training field. No matter how excellent our work or how famous our name, there is always someone else who seems to have just a bit more of what we're striving for. Alas, the chance for creating a comparison twit is always there.

### Image twits

It is always good to have a clear perception of ourselves as professional individuals. However, problems occur—and occur quite often in the training arena—when our self-image doesn't exactly fit with what we're actually doing or accomplishing.

For example, if we see ourselves as excelling in interactive work with small groups but find ourselves frequently accepting speaking engagements in front of large audiences, we find our activities out of kilter with our self-image. Then we're in a twit about the time we are wasting and even the values we are compromising.

much more difficult to accomplish.

Nits may be ongoing or temporary, depending on our relationship with the individual who is key to our nit. If that person is the boss or an office colleague, the nit is likely to stick for a long time. We either work with the other individual to resolve it, we change jobs, or we live with it as a nagging companion.

Temporary nits happen when we team up with someone else on a project or when we run into conflict with a short-term client or workshop participant. On one hand, these nits are brief enough that we can rationalize our tendency to avoid confronting them. On the other hand, we may stew about them long after the event or project is finished; we're then left with bad feelings about a job not done as well as it might have been.

### Cotraining nits

Among trainers, perhaps no nit is more memorable—and aggravating—than that involving a cotrainer. Training with a colleague can be a delight and can have many advantages. Energy levels, audience attention, and creativity all seem easier to maintain when two trainers run a program

Who gets to meet with the client while the other collates the notebooks? Who makes copies of the handouts? Who checks the audiovisual equipment?

During the session, control issues are marked by trainers concerning themselves more with the amount of speaking time and participant affection they receive than with the training objectives: "It was all 50-50 during our design and planning for the workshop. But during the actual training, she kept mentioning things like 'my agenda' and 'my workshop.' The participants probably thought I was the assistant rather than the cotrainer."

The real difficulty of the cotraining nit is not so much that it occurs but that it is so difficult to resolve. Many such nits happen in front of an audience, and any attempts to confront and resolve them have to be held until later. By that time one or both cotrainers may be thinking "Why bother? It's over now anyway." Or the waiting period might cause the nit to build to explosive levels; then any discussion may simply be a confrontation without benefit of objective thought or real resolution.

### Ongoing nits

Bosses, colleagues, and long-term clients can be the source of some of our most difficult tensions: ongoing nits. Unlike the conflicts with cotrainers, these don't just recede into the background of our experience after the training is finished.

Few of us have *never* thought that a particular boss was too demanding, a colleague was too lazy, or a client too difficult. Even though we may have plenty of chances to talk things out with these individuals, we often avoid the opportunities. We may preach leveling, confrontation, and conflict resolution to participants, but we don't necessarily practice it in our own professional lives. It's like the old adage about doctors being the worst at their own health care.

Nits with bosses arise when their expectations don't match our own or when we perceive that the boss "doesn't understand what it's really like out there." Bosses always seem to want that progress report or complex memo right in the middle of our rambling to finish an important training design. They don't seem to understand that we can't be productive achievers without more clerical support or the latest audiovisual equipment. Our common nit is that they give mere lip service to our work without really supporting it with ap-

propriate budgets and schedules.

With colleagues, our nits tend to be about work load. Someone always seems to be pulling less than his or her weight, and we feel like we're stuck making up the difference. That same lucky someone seems to be able to keep on the good side of everyone else. Often the subject of this nit is a person with lots of personality and bright ideas but little willingness or ability to follow through on the details.

Client nits are pure "gotcha." We need that difficult client, and it makes us angry that we have to "step and fetch" to an individual we don't like or respect. But what else can we do?

The client who gets us in a nit seems picky, demanding, unrealistic, and ungrateful. He or she has a way of letting us know that there are plenty of other trainers out there as well as a way of getting us to do twice as much as what the contract calls for.

### The sound of a snit

Snits arise when we have problems with a whole group of other people, generally a group of training participants. These tensions may range from head-on conflicts about learning styles or expectations to more subtle discomfort within the group.

## We begin wondering whether we're current enough in our knowledge or quick enough on our feet to be in training in the first place

While twits and nits are no fun, they at least can be handled internally or one-on-one. However, snits feel like "me against the world."

Snits can result from problems within the group, within the trainer, or both. For example, the group may have been led to expect something other than what the trainer was contracted to deliver. Or the individuals in the group may be unhappy that they were commanded to attend. Or the training may be occurring at a time when participants are under stress from problems within their organization.

We trainers bear the responsibility for snits when we are too directive about personal points-of-view before a group of highly individualistic participants. Or perhaps we are too "loose" for a group that wants and needs more nuts-and-bolts direction. In either case we might find ourselves getting somewhat defensive and compounding the snit. But we also have to be careful about the temptation to "go

along to get along" with a group. Participants often seem able to sniff out that posture and back us right into a corner.

Most groups go through natural stages of development, starting with dependency on the leader and moving on to interdependency—a stage marked by shared responsibility and productive interaction. Snits have a way of becoming barriers to this developmental progression and leaving the group in a state of counterdependency. At this stage, nobody feels good about the group, the trainer, or the event. Grumbling and mumbling take the place of learning.

### Attendance snits

A frequent snit is the one stemming from mandated attendance. Trainers often face participants who are there for one reason: they were told they had to attend. Such participants generally enter angry, frustrated, and uninterested in the subject matter to be addressed. They can't vent their anger on those responsible for sending them to the session, so they arrive ready to take it out on the trainer.

Our natural first reaction is to demonstrate to the group that they'll really be glad they attended. We defend the importance of the subject matter. We do

everything but handstands to show our enthusiasm for this wonderful learning opportunity. But if we don't give participants their chance to snarl and growl, we all end up snitting our way through the rest of the session.

The scary part of this snit is our subconscious concern about losing control of the group. What if we let them go off on their own tangent and never get them back to the real point of this training? What if the participants end up spending half their training time collectively attacking the organization? On the other hand, can we ever get to learning or to client satisfaction if the group continues to be so embroiled in frustration that its members never actually buy into the training?

### Expectation snits

Snits similar to the above occur when the group expects one thing (possibly for reasons well outside the trainer's control) and quickly realizes it is going to get

something different. Many participants arrive expecting the training to give them the solution for the most pressing problem they are currently facing in their work. But such lofty expectations rarely, if ever, can be met within the purview of one training event, and they certainly cannot be met for every participant.

Other participants may have misinterpreted the subject of the training when they read the printed announcement about it. Such announcements are generally couched in broad terms like "productivity," "motivation," and "communications." Trainers and trainees may have very different ideas about what might occur in sessions that address those topics.

### Mismatching snits

Snits stemming from a mismatch of learning styles are understandable: We all know that different people learn in different ways. As trainers, we try to address this by including a repertoire of different approaches directed at a variety of learning styles.

But when a whole group of participants leans toward one learning style (perhaps didactic) while the trainer leans toward another (perhaps interactive), the situation

was told to expect a small group of mid-level managers but was faced with 22 participants who ranged from veteran supervisors to clerks and labor foremen. The training department had become worried that too few people were signing up for the session, so they opened it up to all levels."

We usually try to make the best of such situations by pitching various parts of our presentations to various participants, and by trying to avoid addressing the "lowest common denominator." At any given time, we realize someone is finding the session irrelevant to their needs. Acknowledging that, we start silently fuming about "what this client has done to me." And the participants start angrily thinking the same exact thoughts.

### Environmental snits

The training environment also creates snits. Sometimes the world outside seems to conspire against our best training efforts. We may have a dynamite design, a terrific training team, and a good group of participants, but the time and place just don't fit.

This easily occurs when other organizational issues are so immediate and pervasive that participants just can't settle

the city council of a very large municipality. During lunch on the second day, the mayor's budget officer arrived to distribute copies of the just-completed draft of next year's city budget. Goal prioritizing went right out the window."

The most disturbing factor about environmental stress issues is that they seem so completely out of our control. And they seem to happen just when we had a very good shot at making this one of our best training events ever.

### Tackling the terrible trio

It is probably impossible to eliminate the twits, nits, and snits from our profession, but there are ways of lowering the number of times they occur and lessening the impact they have. We must identify, confront, and address these disruptive states of conflict. This involves developing action plans so that we're not caught in conflicts by surprise but, rather, have tools at the ready to deal with these situations.

A good way to start dealing with these uncomfortable circumstances is to recognize them early and meet them head-on. Talk to yourself! Tell yourself "Oops, here comes a big twit. I've got to cool down." Or ask yourself "Where is this nit coming from, and what do I want to do about it?" Your internal candor about the situation is the first step in dealing with conflict—before it deals with you.

Another technique is preparation. We rarely devote enough time and energy to the important task of contracting with clients and cotrainers. Contracting with others to clarify expectations, objectives, and roles is essential homework for a training program. For internal twits, a role negotiation exercise can help. Ask yourself "What do I need to do more of, less of, or the same in order to feel more effective?" Many nits and snits can be headed off by frank discussions with colleagues and clients *well before* the training begins.

Be willing to talk with others about all three kinds of tensions. If your twit has you so embroiled in self-doubt that you can't even remember how it originated, a colleague or friend may be able to help you make sense of things. Since nits and snits concern other people, they need to be addressed with those people. Use the leveling and listening techniques you would use in a training session. Give feedback and ask for feedback. It really does work.

Even when the issue is within the group of participants, such as with mismatched experience levels or organizational stress,

### **We've experienced the frustration of training in dingy, windowless rooms with uncomfortable chairs permanently affixed to their classroom position**

is ripe for conflict. When a snit of this type gets under way, participants are likely to begin grumbling among themselves that they came to get answers, not play games. Or they may start griping that the trainer is telling them what to do instead of letting them learn. The mismatch of training styles and participant learning styles is as disconcerting for the trainer as it is for the participants.

Another area of mismatching comes from within the group itself. While there are some real advantages to mixed groups and groups of strangers, some of these are so diverse that participants begin to wonder "How can this relate to me if it relates to these other people?"

This is a particularly thorny issue when a group contains a wide variety of organizational levels and experience levels. Veteran managers and new first-line supervisors simply may not expect to be in a training program together, and this can spark a group snit about the training itself and develop into a conflict with the trainer: "I

down to our training topic. Maybe the latest rumor about budget cuts has them worried about their jobs. Or maybe they just got word about an important new project that needs to be completed under a tight deadline.

Environmental issues also refer to the immediate surroundings of the training. We've experienced the frustration of training in dingy, windowless rooms with uncomfortable chairs permanently affixed to their classroom position. The physical surroundings can become a real barrier to learning and may lead to a snit that spills over onto disgruntlement with the subject matter and the trainer.

Unexpected interruptions make for yet another kind of environmental stress. A visit from the "big boss" is one such occasion, especially if he or she simply arrives unannounced and skulks around in a back corner for an hour or so. Everyone, including the trainer, wastes a lot of mental energy wondering what's going on: "I was running a two-day goal-setting retreat for

it can be confronted with appropriate feedback to the group. This may mean calling "time out" from the training topic for awhile, but the time spent will be made up through more productive learning in the long run.

It also helps to look on the bright side of tensions—there *is* one. Don't consider twits, nits, and snits to be all bad. They make us uncomfortable, but they also keep us on our toes. For example, your feelings of competition with a cotrainer can sometimes heighten your performance level. Confronting control issues with a colleague may give you a chance to practice what you have preached in training sessions. Issues that crop up between you and your audience may guide you to a very necessary restatement of the purpose and the client for the training. Even internal self-doubts are not all bad. They can be the catalyst for your attempt to improve or your decision to change.

Another effective way of dealing with twits, nits, and snits is to address them as a training issue. Whenever you have the opportunity, build discussions of these issues into training programs, especially train-the-trainer programs. This can help you and others learn ways to work with the conflicts and can comfort you with a sense of company: "It really does happen to everybody." There is no use pretending that twits, nits, and snits don't happen to trainers. They are permanent fixtures in our professional lives, and telling others about them helps.

### Work some magic

Find comfort when dealing with twits, nits, and snits by thinking of the famous Harry Houdini. Houdini was a professional problem solver as well as a magician. Sometimes he allowed his audience to tie him up or surround him with chains. Sometimes he worked with a partner who would clamp him into a straight jacket. And sometimes he constructed his own set of problems, binding himself in knots or locking himself in a box. Then he went to work—confronting and defeating every iron fetter, brass lock, and knotted rope. Without problems, Houdini wouldn't have had a profession. What made him truly remarkable was his ability to overcome every obstacle he or others presented. By viewing your conflicts as challenging—not unmountable—obstacles, you may just complete some remarkable feats yourself!



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