

# Training 101

## A Room of One's Own

Setting the right mood for a training session can be as crucial as having the right materials. People react in different ways to different environments, often subconsciously. The trick is knowing the appropriate atmosphere for your objectives—and knowing how to achieve it.

An austere, utilitarian setup says to trainees, "Let's get down to business and get this over with." A cheerful, homey room with snacks, plush carpeting, music, and fresh flower arrangements sends a different message entirely: "We're here to learn from each other, so let's take the time to relax so that we can be open and honest and really communicate."

Of course, most training sessions fall between those extremes. In any case, an atmosphere that is business-like and free of distractions—while being upbeat and comfortable—helps people focus their attention on the course content, rather than on the construction noises outside the window, the heater that doesn't know when to quit, or the fact that the chairs seem to have been designed for users from another planet.

Ugly surroundings depress people. If you're stuck with walls the color of pea soup, concrete floors, glaring lights, and flea-market furniture, you should realize how that can affect the mood of your class—and maybe consider some ways to compensate, if you can't get another meeting place.

This month, "Training 101" looks at the trainer as interior decorator. No, we're not advocating a career change, just an awareness of your surroundings and how they may affect your program. The authors deal with the "look," size, and arrangement of your meeting room, and with the subtle and not-so-subtle effects of color.

### Climate Control

*By Coleman Finkel, president, Conference Center Development Corporation, Suite 6-F, 205 East 95th Street, New York, NY 10128.*

Meetings are a common, everyday reality in almost every organization. They are held for many purposes, including arriving at decisions, resolving problems, announcing changes, receiving input on issues, assigning follow-up responsibilities, developing action plans, reviewing progress, conveying information, and, of course, training employees.

The quality of meeting leadership and the degree of preparation are of paramount importance to the success of a discussion meeting, but three other considerations are also important, although they are often overlooked: the "climate," the meeting environment, and the design of the meeting space.

■ Climate refers to participants' reactions to the stimuli of the meeting area. Such feelings are real, but they are usually subconscious. They represent an overall impression—good, bad, or neutral.

■ The meeting environment involves the physical parts of the meeting area: its decor, furniture, and other furnishings.

■ The room design considers such factors as size and kinds of spaces.

The trainer or meeting organizer must pay attention to those three factors, if the meeting is to achieve the greatest results and live up to the potential inherent in the dynamics of the meeting process.

Climate, environment, and room design contribute in various ways to the success of a discussion meeting.

As a springboard for the evaluation, the following considerations should be weighed:

- What approaches can be taken to provide for the physical comfort and psychological ease of participants in the meeting environment?
- How does room size influence

the participation of attendees?

■ In what ways does the setup of the room affect the sense of equality among participants?

■ Participants may feel a lot of pressure in a meeting, especially if discussion is intense. What arrangements can be made in the physical aspects of the environment to reduce that pressure?

■ How can the meeting organizers keep participants focused on the discussion through control of the environment?

### Physical comfort and psychological ease

When participants enter a meeting room, their first impressions should be feelings of warmth, brightness, cheerfulness, and difference. They should feel that the room is a special place. It should not appear austere or make-do, and should not look like the decor of an office or of the surrounding work spaces. Certain features will help to promote those positive feelings:

■ **Special chairs.** The best are rich-looking and can swivel. They should have wheels, reclining backs, arms, firm seats, and colored upholstery.

■ **Lighting.** Evenly spaced fluorescent lights will give a warm, bright, natural glow throughout the room.

■ **Wall covering.** Walls should be in cheerful, upbeat hues of green, blue, orange, or yellow. A vinyl covering is better than paint.

■ **Chair spacing.** For ease of movement, provide a space of two and a half feet between chairs.

■ **Distance from table to walls.** Participants will feel less cramped and overcrowded if the edge of the table is seven to eight feet from the wall behind the chairperson and four to five feet from the other three walls.

### Optimum participation

The value of a discussion meeting is in the combined input of all participants. Each person should have a

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sense of identity with the entire group, and should be able to easily hear and see every other participant. Nobody should feel left out.

To ensure that everyone feels a part of the discussion group, consider the meeting-room dimensions. Rooms should not be long and narrow. That forces participants to sit too far apart, giving a sense of isolation to people at the end of the room. Instead, rooms should be as square as possible. Remember, the length of a room should not exceed its width by more than 50 percent (in other words, a room that is 20 feet wide should not be more than 30 feet long).

## Sense of equality

Participants should not feel "second class" in a discussion meeting, but the typical setup in many meetings can engender such a feeling. The traditional meeting arrangement—a long, rectangular conference table, with the chairperson at the head—is often to blame.

The lone seating of the chairperson underscores that person's power and position. Those sitting close to

that end of the table can readily engage in quiet conversations. Those at the far end, removed from the "power" source, may feel left out and remote from the action focus. The shape of the table directs the flow of discussion toward the head, reducing the inclination to trade ideas.

A different arrangement (see the figure) provides several advantages:

- it gives attendees equal "territory";
- it pulls participants closer together and makes it easier for them to hear and see one another;
- it fosters a sense of group solidarity.

## Reduce pressure

Participants may feel under pressure during discussion meetings. Passions can grow during heated exchanges, building subtle duress; expressions of conflicting points of view can cause resentments; and even the intensity of discussion and the need for concentration can cause tension. In addition, people get tired mentally and physically from sitting in one place and absorbing information for several hours.

Morning and afternoon breaks

provide a change of pace and a chance for relaxation. It may be best to hold breaks in a room or area separate from the meeting place; the meeting room represents intensity, structure, business, and formality. Instead, offer a fresh and new environment. Plan the ambience to take advantage of the break's informality. In a pressure-free setting, attendees are more inclined to talk openly with one another, clarifying information, extending thoughts, and settling differences. In a separate, relaxed space, the leader may be able to talk informally with participants, and can deal with problems in one-on-one conversations with them.

A break room should include features to make participants feel comfortable and relaxed, such as lounge seating, windows, tables, lamps, and carpeting. Try for a room with pictures on the walls, attractive wallpaper, and subdued lighting.

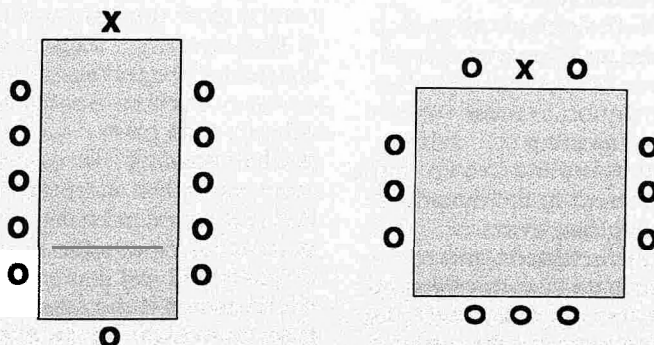
## Maintain focus

Participants in a discussion meeting must concentrate on what's going on, in order to achieve the highest levels of learning and participation. That mental set is not easy for some people, who may not have had to focus their attention in such a way since they were in school. They may be used to moving around through their day-to-day work, busy with a variety of tasks. Now they must sit for extended periods of time.

Certain elements in the meeting environment can affect the concentration level of participants:

- The heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning system should allow individual control from each room so that the chairperson can adjust it for the comfort of the group. It must operate quietly. The system should be able to clear the air and keep it fresh, especially if smoking is permitted. Stale air and noise from the system will affect concentration.
- After much study, I don't believe windows belong in a meeting room.

A comparison of room arrangements



**A traditional set-up** directs the flow of discussion to the chairperson (X) at the head of the table. It reduces exchange of ideas and can make those at the far end feel left out.

**A different arrangement** makes participants feel like equals, pulls them closer and makes it easier for them to trade ideas, and fosters a sense of solidarity.

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They let in outside noise, encourage participants to gaze outdoors, affect levels of lighting in the room as the day passes, and affect room temperature as the mercury rises and falls outside. Those factors can interfere with concentration and add to mental fatigue.

■ Pictures on the walls can be distracting, as attendees study them rather than paying attention to the discussion. Only meeting-related material should be on the walls.

■ When the body or mind becomes tired, a person's ability to think effectively is reduced. Some common elements of meeting areas should be avoided because they can lead to fatigue. They include light shining in the eyes of participants from such reflective surfaces as mirrors, glass, and metal; outside noises; poor lighting; uncomfortable chairs; overheated rooms; and bad air quality.

■ The door to a meeting room should be on the wall away from where the chairperson sits. People should not have to pass by the chairperson in order to enter or leave the room, because their movements can disturb and interrupt the concentration of the group.

## Perfection in trifles

Michelangelo said "Perfection is made of trifles." In the design of a meeting area, "perfection" is achieved through the meticulous attention to details.

Many meeting organizers overlook such details, ignore them, or dismiss them as unimportant. Taken individually, they may not seem significant, but their cumulative impact can have a powerful influence on an attendee's attitude, degree of involvement, and sense of satisfaction from a discussion meeting.

Paying attention to the details of a meeting or training room's climate, environment, and design may not require a large investment. It does require careful and knowledgeable planning—and an objective look at traditional approaches to one of the

most prevalent person-to-person activities in organizations.

## Shades of Training

*By MaryLou Dellafiora, a consultant, trainer, and writer at 151-10 35th Avenue, Flushing, NY 11354.*

There's more to why trainers use colored markers than they realize. Color, like a trainer's voice or style, is a powerful influence that acts on the subconscious mind of the beholder. That includes the instructor as well as the student.

Have you ever noticed your own preference for certain colors while instructing? Have you ever noticed that, in the throes of explaining a particularly illuminating example, or while following an edifying thought, you have automatically reached for an appropriate color to help get your idea across? It might be that you reached for a color that reflected a meaning or feeling that supported your message.

Color is the property of light by which we are made aware of objects. When white light passes through a prism, we can see that it contains all seven colors of the spectrum: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Objects absorb, transmit, or reflect the light, making it possible for us to distinguish their colors.

In many training sessions, most of the information on a flipchart, say, a listing of items, is written in a base color—usually brown, navy, royal blue, or plain black. Titles, headings, and embellishments are done in a "teaser" color such as orange or apple-green, which catches the eye and highlights the information. Used together, many colors complement each other and stimulate visual interest. But the real appeal goes deeper.

Remember the rainbow bedsheets and window decals that were all the rage in the late seventies? A rainbow is simply an arch of color bands

formed by the reflection and bending of sunlight by drops of rain or mist. The bands are the colors of the spectrum. Adults as well as children clamor excitedly upon seeing nature's most chromatically complete wonder. The reason? The rainbow has not only a visual attractiveness, but also a subconscious one. Its appeal lies in the blending of the spectral colors, producing a harmony not only of color, but of emotion.

## The rainbow connection

People subconsciously select colors that reflect their moods. Blue is the color of peace. It invites the easing of tensions and brings tranquility to people and situations. Conscious use of blue may be particularly useful in stress-management training, where the goal is physical and emotional relaxation.

Red signifies intense love, desire, anger, or impulsiveness. For trainers, red helps make dramatic statements and bold reminders.

Color often evokes images and metaphors in the mind. Yellow conjures up "emotional sunshine." It is the color of replenishment—think of tall sunflowers growing unhampered in a field.

Green is a prominent color of nature. It reminds people of serene forests and fertile jungles. Its life-giving tone revitalizes and nourishes. Used in employee-assistance training, green offers the subconscious a sense of newness, encouragement, and "re-birth," much like the cyclical flowering of nature. Guests appearing on television shows often wait for their turns in what is called "the Green Room." In the theatre, that term is used for the area behind the stage, where performers await their cues; in many theatres, it is actually painted green. In both cases, the color is employed as a subtle calming technique and as a confidence booster.

Brown is also a nature color. Brown reminds us of trees, bark,

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and roots; it promotes feelings of safety and security. Have you ever noticed that, along with the traditional navy blue, many law-enforcement and security-guard uniforms are brown? The reason? Brown subconsciously and quietly assures.

## Color abuse

A color-savvy instructor can use the language of color to subliminally align concepts with feelings. It is an automatic reinforcement technique. Charts, handouts, and even the pages of texts or manuals can be coded to the overall atmosphere or emotional goals of the course.

An understanding of color and its gentle influence on the mind and body serves not only as a therapeutic tool, but also as a diagnostic one.

With your next class, widen your scope by taking in the entire environment—colorwise. Sit back and really notice the predominant colors of the room itself. Are they bold? Drab? Outdated? What do they do for the overall atmosphere of the room? Do the colors contribute or take away? Enliven or depress?

My experience has been that most organizations insist on adherence to a prescribed code of “professionalism” in colors, even in the learning environment. White or beige walls are prevalent, with dark carpets and few windows to let in light. The absence or misuse of color in the training room impedes the rate and ease with which the instructor shares and the students learn.

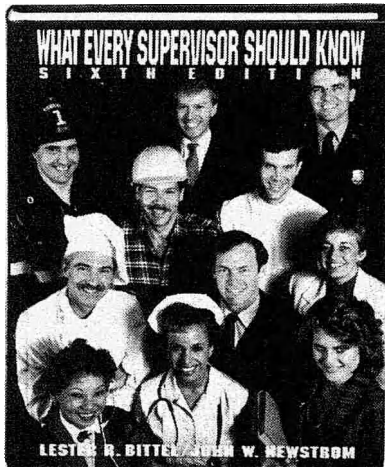
People are directly affected by the colors that surround them. “Color

abuse” can impede the instructor’s attempts at setting a tone that invites trainees to open up and share or absorb information. We react physically to various shades and color combinations, but those reactions may be subtle. An instructor may perfect every aspect of delivery and content, but still experience a nagging sense that something about the class remains amiss. The instructor’s “vibrations” or body language may echo that discomfort.

My advice is to check the colors. Begin with the walls and ceiling, and then pay attention to the chairs, drapery, and other furnishings. Do colors invite people to enter and feel comfortable? Or are they stark and “professional”?

One of my favorite environments to work in is a particular conference-

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room-turned-training-room. In the center is a medium-brown wood table encircled by matching chairs covered in a tweedy, pale mauve. The carpet is a lush maroon that serves, with the cream-color walls, as a contrasting but complementary backdrop. On the walls hang black-and-white caricatures framed in contemporary silver. They show trainers and trainees in humorous situations, a testimony to a relaxed and appealing environment.

## Bright ideas

A trainer can creatively bring color to even the most sterile rooms. Striking, pre-made charts that expand on themes of the course can be hung on lifeless walls. In stress-training classes with exercises that call for the use of balloons, purchase huge,

shocking red or purple ones. If you use candy or favors as incentives or tokens, search for some in vividly colored wrappers.

Perhaps the quickest way to strengthen a room is with a jolt of color as a focal point. A room used regularly would benefit from a strategically placed variegated floral arrangement. The environment will be immediately softened. A single-color bouquet of fresh-cut flowers, such as brilliant yellow tulips, is often my personal contribution to a class—and my little gift to myself. Set with full green leaves in the center of a U-shaped table formation, the flowers enliven pale walls and temper fluorescent lighting.

The lighting of a room exerts a tremendous influence on a person's perception of color and its ensuing

effects. An object that absorbs light nonselectively produces a neutral color. If little light is absorbed, the object will appear white; if most of the light is absorbed, the result is black.

White walls reflect almost all of the light that falls on them. Some darker colors absorb most of the light, reflecting only about a quarter of it. Walls painted dark colors, such as the earth tones that became popular in the seventies and are still used in some training rooms, cause much light to be lost, because it stays in the walls.

I have always preferred sunlight in a training room, when it's available. Opening the blinds fully and turning down artificial lights helps counteract dulling and soften glare. For rooms without windows, try to vary

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the combination of lights, using only certain rows of lights or experimenting with dimmers. Arrive early for a class. That will allow you to set the stage in advance, usually without

anyone even realizing the subtle differences.

Color is a large determinant in the overall comfort of a room. Perhaps the true test is the degree of will-

ingness of the students to remain in the room during breaks. A well-orchestrated setting often encourages trainees to linger and even eat lunch in the training room.

## Living color

Examine your audience. What do your students' clothes tell you about how they felt that morning? Notice if people stick to the same color scheme each day that you're with them. Does it tell you anything? Even in a mass of blue or gray suits, you can look for color in ties and other accessories. Many students attend the first day of class dressed "professionally." After they are comfortable with the expectations and have checked out the trainer, many dispense with such rigidity. The trainee who wore a navy-blue suit on the first day may show up on the second in a fire-engine red sweater and warm beige chinos.

Almost everyone has at times noticed "coincidental" similarities of color coordination among members of groups. A particularly obvious display of color-likeness occurred in one of my classes a few years ago. I had dressed that morning in a shocking pink satin blouse and a black wool skirt. When I entered the classroom I noticed that all four of the female participants also wore deep pink in combination with black. The one male participant wore a dark suit and a light pink tie.

To this day I ponder that "coincidence" of colors. I am willing to believe it affirmed that we had together created a particularly cohesive atmosphere of learning. Our subconsciously like-minded, though individual, color choices reflected our mutual feelings of satisfaction and achievement.

## Showing your true colors

You can subtly and positively enhance your effectiveness through color in your wardrobe. Depending on your eye, hair, and skin coloring, certain shades and combinations of



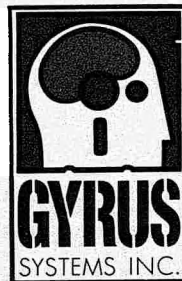
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colors are more flattering than others. With a knowledge of your own "best" colors, you can select from them the ones that correspond with the atmosphere you want to create in the classroom.

Personal colors for wardrobe or makeup selection are often categorized as seasons.

■ "Winter" people have either dark or milky-white skin with red undertones, and dark hair with pale highlights. Their most flattering colors include deep red, navy blue, black, and white; colors with yellow or orange undertones dull the overall appearance.

■ "Summers," with fair skin and ash-colored hair, are vitalized by periwinkle blue, vivid rose, soft pink, or pastel blue.

■ "Springs" are people with ivory skin that has yellow undertones; they have auburn-like hair. They should play up the yellow. True turquoise, salmon pink, and ivory also flatter especially well.

■ "Autumn" people have dark skin with yellow-red or gold undertones, and golden or taupe hair. Some of their best colors are rust, coral, and salmon pink.

Trainers can harness the energy of their best colors. A vibrantly dressed instructor won't blend into the surroundings. Assessing the colors in your wardrobe can create a positive difference in your acceptance by students, both personally and professionally. Coordinated color dressing is a discreet and immediate rapport builder.

Some people shy away from strong expressions of color through their clothes, preferring "safe" shades such as ivory, beige, or pale gray. But neutrals or dark, drab colors may actually make you look shorter.

Inappropriate use of strong colors can emphasize figure flaws, which causes some people to avoid bright colors entirely. That can lead to "color exhaustion," a reliance mostly on "safe" black or navy for slim-

ming effects, which can result in a downright boring or depressing wardrobe. Instead, try wearing bright colors near your face to draw attention upward. Pairing a neutral with a bright will help to enliven without overwhelming.

Color is all around us; we encounter it constantly from the moment we open our eyes in the morning. Perhaps because of our tendency to become de-sensitized to things that surround us, we often fail to really notice color. More important, we fail to attune ourselves to its effects and messages.

Beginning with a concerted effort to first observe and then analyze color schemes, patterns, and preferences, a trainer can conceive of and work to create an atmosphere of immediate and lasting rapport. He or she can also chart a particular course of feeling to correspond with or enhance course concepts.

Color plays an unassuming yet vital and powerful role in every aspect of our lives. With greater understanding and conscious application in the training room, color can become a subtle but effective learning tool.

*"Training 101" is edited by Cathy Petrini. Send your short articles for consideration to Training 101, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.*

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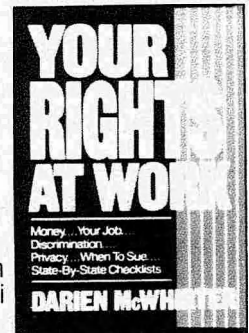
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