# Sensitive Subjects

By Elizabeth Schroeder

Editor's Note: *In the August 1999 issue of* Training & Development, *Training 101 contributor Rita Risser urged trainers to know the laws about sexual harassment and to incorporate that knowledge into their training. This month, we offer specifics on how to conduct training about sensitive subjects such as sexual harassment—and similar subjects—through lessons from training about one of the most ticklish topics of all: sexuality education.*

Planned Parenthood of New York City has been providing women with reproductive health care for more than 80 years. Historically, PPNYC has provided professional training programs as agencies requested them. Recently, however, we decided to create a formal training institute that would allow us to offer training in a more coordinated, standardized manner. In 1998, PPNYC opened the Robert and Harriet Heilbrunn Center for Community Outreach, Education, and Training. Its goal is to help youth-serving professionals develop or hone their skills as teachers, speakers, and presenters by combining education (informational updates) and training (skills-building theory and practice) in every session.

A significant aspect of PPNYC's mission is to provide sex education to the general population. That includes skill-building training—in sexuality and sexual health, public policy, and medical procedures for reproductive health—for professionals who work with adolescents and children in the United States and overseas. When we teach and train about sexual health, we do so within the broadest definition of the term: We see sexuality as an integral aspect of every person's life, encompassing human anatomy and reproduction, gender roles and identity, sexual behaviors, relationship issues, and so forth. Our programs target New York City, but participants have traveled from as far as Nebraska and Wisconsin. In our first year, we hoped to reach approximately 250 professionals with our training. By the end of December 1998, we had trained nearly 800.

Training programs are held in-house and employ both internal trainers and outside experts. Training topics for 1998 included Sexuality 101, Adolescent Sexual Behaviors and Trends, Relationship Abuse in Teenage Lives, Sexual Orientation, and Working with Young Fathers. We also continue to provide customized training on request to other organizations.

PPNYC also offers two specialized, multiday skills-building programs. The first, a Sexual Attitude Reassessment (SAR), helps participants learning to be sexuality trainers to explore their attitudes, values, and beliefs about sexuality. The goal is not to change their views but to help them become aware of those issues and assess how they will impart such information to others.

We also offer a train-the-trainer program that teaches participants how to design a program—how to set the climate, develop goals, select appropriate teaching methods, and so forth. The program also lets them practice presentation and facilitation skills.

One of the first questions people outside of this field ask is, *Who is providing sexuality information and education to young people, and in what contexts?* The answer varies from state to state and from locality to locality. Many social service providers and agencies offer workshops in addition to classes in school settings. Often, experts in content say they need help developing their skills in communicating information and facilitating group process.

Frequently, sex education is delegated to a teacher of a nonhealth-related topic who lacks the training, interest, or comfort level. It's often part of a health class, left until the end if the teacher is uncomfortable with the topic and left out completely if material must be cut because of time constraints. Then, agencies such as Planned Parenthood are called in at the last minute to provide classes, which can give young people important information but don't prepare teachers and other school professionals for the additional questions and issues that may arise once the expert has left.

## The relevant issues

Teachers and other school professionals need extensive training on how to teach sexual education. Some of the important issues that shape such training are climate setting, trainer expertise, self-disclosure, diversity, evaluation, organizational politics, and updating.

Climate setting. In many training forums, participants feel it's risky to share information and are concerned that it won't remain confidential. When training about sexuality issues, we ask participants to share information that is even more personal—about their experiences, values, and beliefs concerning an extremely sensitive topic. The trainer's responsibility is to create a safe climate for all trainees and is a direct result of the next item, trainer expertise.

Trainer expertise. No matter the training topic, we all have probably attended at least one event where the trainer wasn't well-versed in the topic or skilled in managing the group. In sexuality training, group process and facilitation are among the most important skills a trainer can have. It's possible that the subject matter will recall an actual experience in a participant's life. The high incidence of sexual abuse in the United States suggests that in any training about this topic, there will be at least a few participants who have experienced such abuse. Facilitators must be highly sensitive and intuitive in order to maintain a safe feeling for each individual and for the group. Activities and teaching methods that appeal to a variety of learning styles can make the information easier to absorb and can dispel discomfort.

Self-disclosure. There are varying schools of thought about whether a trainer should disclose information about her- or himself, regardless of the subject being taught. In sexuality training, self-disclosure can include intimate information and, if not well-thought-out by the trainer, can alter the direction or dynamic of the training. For example, if a trainer is teaching participants how to work with young people on sexual orientation issues and discloses that she is lesbian, she may be setting herself up in two ways. One, because she is the perceived author-

*Illustration by Michael Woloschino*

ity, some concrete thinkers may hear her disclosure as the "correct" information and assume that her experiences represent those of all lesbians or gay people. Two, that type of disclosure can be distracting to participants who are uncomfortable with homosexuality. They may focus on the disclosure rather than on the tasks at hand. The generally accepted rule is that trainers who disclose anything personal should only if it furthers the training goals.

Diversity issues. Like other trainers, sexuality trainers need to be aware of and sensitive to the diversity of participants. Although there will—and should—be a wide range of diversity in any kind of training, individual differences in culture, ethnicity, religion, and so forth can affect a discussion of sexuality more dramatically than a program on management or HR issues. For example, members of some cultures and religions believe that people should not engage in sexual behavior outside of marriage; some believe that homosexuality shouldn't be discussed or accepted. Some cultures are against birth control; others oppose abortion. However, experts agree that young people need information about all of those topics. Sexuality trainers must be sure to develop lessons and activities that acknowledge a wide range of feelings, many of which are deep-seated and all of which should be respected.

It's important to teach about such topics without contradicting people's personal values and beliefs. We teach trainers how to provide facts about a topic with which they're uncomfortable or have strong conflicting values. Trainers should be aware of any feelings a topic may bring up, and they should facilitate a discussion that differentiates between facts and beliefs. That's probably the most challenging aspect of sexuality training and needs improving.

Evaluation. Trainers know that evaluation is important, but there are some special reasons that nonprofit organizations in particular need to evaluate their offerings—to provide firm information for improving the quality of the program and the trainer. Further, evaluations help nonprofit organizations prove their programs' worth to donors. Evaluations are not only valuable to our internal process, but they also serve as proof of the successful work we do.

Often, when conducting a training program on a specific topic, we incorporate pre- and post-tests to assess the extent to which the training has affected the knowledge, attitudes, and intended behaviors of the participants. We also incorporate a standard subjective written evaluation of the training content, the trainer, and the level of the material. We ask participants various questions about what brought them to a particular session, the other topics on which they'd like training, and whether they thought the fee was reasonable.

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The evaluation process doesn't end at the conclusion of our programs. Three months after an event, we send participants a follow-up survey on how they're using the information and skills they learned. That survey measures changes in participants' knowledge about and comfort with specific topic areas, as well as how frequently they are incorporating their new skills.

Organizational politics. Trainers in any organization must be aware of internal politics that might affect the training they're conducting. For example, a management consultant might suggest role plays about what she or he thinks is a hypothetical situation and accidentally hit on a real problem the client is having.

With sexuality training, organizational politics are slightly different. Frequently, a client organization sets limits on what we're allowed to discuss with its staff. Other times, participants attend our in-house training, knowing full well that they may not be allowed to use some of the content in their work, due to their organization's policies. Such policies sometimes limit what staff can say about this highly sensitive topic and keep the training from being as fruitful as it could be.

Even if a professional is comfortable with and well trained in sexuality issues, her or his supervisor may choose to limit what's discussed. We see that frequently in schools, where teachers and staff are given a limited number of days each year for professional development training. Even if teachers choose to use one of those days for sexuality training, they're often not allowed to incorporate what they learn into the classroom setting, due to their school's or area's policies. That's frustrating and may dissuade teachers from participating in sexuality training.

Regular updating. Even if an organization can afford to send some staff to training, it's often for only one or two sessions a year. That's a problem in the sexuality field because medical information—particularly about sexually transmitted diseases—is updated frequently. When organizations don't invest money or let staff invest their own time in ongoing professional development, social service professionals often have outdated information.

Regardless of the training subject matter, there are important issues common to all training sessions: climate setting, ground rules, activities that are inclusive of various learning styles, and so forth. The frustrations are also common. No matter what the sector or industry, we've all experienced challenging participants or arrived to find materials missing or a setup different from what we requested. We've conducted programs that have literally changed lives and sessions that have fallen flat.

When training about a sensitive subject, however, it's vital to keep a careful eye on the issues: climate setting, trainer expertise, self-disclosure, diversity, evaluation, organizational politics, and regular updating of the material. Your sessions will be more effective and less volatile.

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