FORWARD
OBSERVER

The Four Deadly Sins of Listservs

By Samantha Chapnick

I believe the off-hours behavior of people who work in the helping professions, such as trainers, is a strong commentary about their on-duty professionalism. Would you take health advice from a doctor who smokes?

We are all subject to human fallibility, but it's naïve to think that one's competence and credibility aren't affected by what one does after clocking out—and what one does with colleagues as well as clients. Clients entrust us with their professional well-being. Thus noted, I find that the behavior of some training and development professionals on listservs is baffling.

No one is immune to email syndrome, which abets and even encourages people to be blunt. There's also a lot of room for interpretation. An email that was intended to be funny can be taken as harsh. But most listservs—such as corped, roinet, trdev, and digging deeper—declare their expertise in their members' signatures, holding them out to the public as qualified professionals who help people and organizations improve. Most people on such lists express the values they hold dear in their interactions and actions. But a minority behave as if they are diametrically opposed to helping people develop self-esteem, deal effectively

with change, or become better learners. They seem to be acting not as members of a respected helping profession but as anonymous individuals saying whatever comes to mind.

It's time for some listserv members to show they can meet higher standards. Before hitting that send button, they should stop and ask whether they're about to commit one of the Four Deadly Sins of Listservs.

Sin 1: Diatribes. When someone on a listserv raises a topic of interest to other members, a healthy discussion typically ensues. So far, so good. Inevitably, the debate runs its course. But sometimes you get a long, long posting from someone who spends the first few paragraphs describing in detail all of his or her qualifications and experience (even when not remotely relevant), writes a few more paragraphs attacking the grammar of previous writers, and finally closes with his or her thoughts on a trillion unrelated topics. The topic is recruitment? The diatribe details the worst employee the writer ever had.

Sin 2: Personal Attacks. By far, this is the deadliest sin any training and development professional can commit. Here's how it goes: Someone disagrees with someone else's opinion. Does that person dissect the argument and address each piece? No. He or she says something like, "How would you know? You have only five years' experience."

Equally annoying is the patronizing tone, evident even in email: "You clearly haven't done your homework on this." The most childish is the mass argument method. A member will say, "I've contact-ed a lot of people on this list, and they agree with me." My personal favorite is the defensive mode when a respondent is cornered and has clearly lost the argument (fairly) and lashes out by saying practically anything: "I'd like to know what other list-servs you're on so I can unsubscribe."

Sin 3: Deception. Many listservs don't allow commercial postings. So, the way a few members get around that is to have one person pose as a consumer and another as a user—such as, "I'm thinking of purchasing XYZ system. Is anyone familiar with it?" Then the "user" chimes in with how great it is. Most listserv members see through the deception.

Sin 4: Rule Rebellion. A listserv isn't a democracy; it's a monarchy run by a usually benign royal creating a forum for dialogue. The monarch, or moderator, creates or maintains the list and enforces the rules of the community—such as no obscene language, no hateful words, staying on topic, and so on. Even if the rules are wacky—"Only people who bathe less than once a month can join"—they're the prerogative of the moderator. If you really object to the rules but like the list-serv, you can challenge the rules con-structively in the same way you might debate an argument rationally.

Let's focus attention on creating environments in which people can thrive and grow even when we aren't being paid, even when we're anonymous faces behind our names.

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Responded!

Here are a few responses to Chapnick's "E-Learning? Show Me the Money!" (Forward Observer, June). All replies have been edited for space.

I'm part of a training department in a company not on the cutting-edge of e-learning. Maybe we're doing the right thing by limiting our use.

Greg L. Cellini

Here you are blasting the effectiveness of anything other than desktop training using e-learning, but your livelihood comes from strategizing, designing, and consulting on e-learning solutions for large companies such as Cisco. I know that Cisco uses e-learning for much more than desktop training…. On one level, I agree with you. If you don't have the basic equipment …then an e-learning solution could be the wrong thing. But I disagree that most compa-nies are in that situation…. If you have double-digit product and service growth like many *Fortune* 500 companies, I challenge you to say, "The solution is a three-day training session." Eventually, e-learning will be micro-bytes of learn-ing built into the tools we use in our everyday lives. You won't have to "go" anyplace. Dell trained more than 15,000 people on the Dell Business Model for about US$25,000. A comparable class-room session would have taken two to four hours. You do the math and tell me you can train 15,000 people for $25,000 using instructors and paying for hotel rooms. That's just one example of hard cost-savings using e-learning. I hope you'll explore the possibilities and imag-ine what can be and, in many cases, is already happening.

Darin Hartley
ASTD

I live in Venezuela, and traditional training is sometimes difficult to deliver because of cultural reasons. E-learning sounds great, but is [priced] way too high, and results won't be that different. I've seen many people come back for traditional classes because they needed the human touch.

Daniel Herrera

I agree [with Chapnick] wholeheartedly. I've been saying the same thing for more than 20 years since the self-paced and video-disc gurus tried to start their revolution.

Glenn J. Gooding
Gooding & Associates

E-learning isn't the cure-all? I have even more shocking news: Flipcharts aren't the training cure-all either. The fact that e-learning may not be appropriate for every situation isn't a statement about the intrinsic nature of e-learning. I'm the training coordinator for a manufacturing firm. There are some subjects for which e-learning is suited but [not others]. We would've spent US$1.4 million on tuition, lost time, and travel training 60 employees, but we looked at e-learning providers and spent $6,000 for training them using e-learning. And we got better quality training materials than we could've produced ourselves and happier employees because we weren't pulling them in for training events to cover material they could learn more easily on their own in their own time. Before trainers…justify their jobs by debunking the "myth" of e-learning, remember the corollary to Sierra's Law: The Stallone-Beanie Baby Principle. It states, "Any product or service perceived by the public as valuable to the point of irrational absurdity will suffer an undeserved decline in popularity in direct proportion to its previously perceived value."

Karl Mindeman

I agree that the cost and hassles of a major e-learning initiative may not be worth it. [We] early adopters learned the hard way. But I think we need to evaluate the options rather than make a quick about-face to the classroom.

Deanne Bryce
LeaderStrength Systems