Lessons in Smallness

How to make the most out of small-group activities.

By Rick Sullivan

As a conscientious university student at the University of Toledo, I vowed to try an instructional approach taught to me by Don Scott. With great anticipation, I posed a brief problem and asked participants to work in small groups to develop a solution. The questions came fast and furious:

- How do we form groups?
- What exactly do you want us to do?
- How much time do we have?
- What do we do when we're finished?

I needed to refine my approach. This is what I learned.

Use small-group activities when you need participants to

- solve a problem presented by the trainer or another participant
- react to a case study presented on paper or onscreen
- prepare a role play and present it to the larger group.

Activities should be challenging, interesting, and relevant; require a short time to complete; and be appropriate to participants' backgrounds. Each group can work on the same activity or take on a different problem, case study, or role play.

Whatever the activity, divide people into groups of four or six. That way, you

- offer participants an opportunity to learn from each other
- involve everyone
- create a sense of teamwork
- provide for a variety of viewpoints.

Create groups. Sometimes, it's appropriate to ask participants to form their own groups, but to keep them from congregating in the same group each time, you'll need several ways to divide them up. The simplest is to assign smaller rooms or breakout rooms located near the primary session room so that groups can work on their problem-solving activities, case studies, or role plays without being distracted by the other groups.

Provide directions. Clear directions are essential. If you don't provide them, you'll cause confusion. Present directions on handouts, a flipchart, or onscreen. Don't give directions orally; participants will only ask, "Now what are we supposed to do?" The directions should include

- general instructions
- time limits
- a situation or problem to discuss, resolve, or role play

Facilitate and process case studies. The power of a case study—a training method that uses realistic scenarios to focus on a specific issue, topic, or problem—comes from its relevance to the course and participants' work environment.

A case study involves participants actively and encourages them to interact. Reactions to case studies provide different perspectives and solutions, and help participants develop problem-solving skills. Devise your own case studies (basing them on organizational documents, records, and experiences of staff or customers), or draw on participants' experiences.

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people to groups based on their backgrounds, previous training experiences, and job responsibilities. You can also create groups based on where participants are sitting in the room—"You four are group 1, the next four are group 2," and so forth. My favorite method is to ask participants to draw a group number, group name, or piece of chocolate (use different kinds for each group).

Arrange the room. The room should be large enough to allow several arrangements of tables and chairs, so that each group can work without disturbing the others. Plus, a large space makes it easier for you to move about and visit each group. Consider using

- participant roles (if a role play)
- questions for group discussion (available for reference throughout the activity).

Process the activity. After groups have completed their work, bring them together for a discussion. Ask them to report their thoughts on the problem, and capture their ideas on a flipchart or onscreen. Reports may include responses to activity questions, role plays, or recommendations from each group. It's important that you lead an effective summary discussion following small-group activities and that subsequent reports provide closure and ensure that participants understand the purpose of the activity.

Give people an opportunity to react to the case study once they've read it. You can use a number of reaction exercises. For example, ask participants to analyze the situation and determine the source of the problem. As part of the analysis, provide open-ended questions to give the group more flexibility in their responses.

You can also ask participants to propose suggestions or solutions. Once they determine their initial responses, let them share them with the large group as reports, answers to questions, or role plays. It's a good idea to summarize the results of a case-study activity before moving on to the next activity or topic to ensure that the group met the learning objective.

Facilitate and process role plays. In role play, participants act out a situation related to the learning objectives. Such activity creates a highly motivational climate because group members are involved in a realistic situation actively, yet they don't have to worry about real-life risks. Role play also provides an opportunity for participants to understand other people's perspectives.

Before conducting any role-play activity, identify what you want people to learn, and then devise a simple situation. Explain what the participants should do and what others in the room should observe. As with all small-group exercises, present the instructions in writing or onscreen so that everyone understands clearly what's to occur. Following the role play, ask questions of both the players and observers, and summarize the central learning points: what happened, what was learned, and how that applies to the learning objectives.

Based on Don Scott's instruction and lots of practice, I've learned that with proper planning and facilitation, small-group activities are an effective and dynamic training approach. Using case studies and role plays, you transport participants from the humdrum of the classroom to a learning realm of the practical—thus making the most of learning objectives.

Rick Sullivan *is the director of learning and performance support at JHPIEGO Corporation; rsullivan@jhpiego.org.*

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