

TRAINING 101

The Difficult Learner

Scarier than Freddie Kreuger—but doesn't have to be.

By Qiana Charles

In an ideal training world, the difficult learner doesn't exist. All participants are excited and eager to take part in the learning experience.

You, however, are a trainer in the real world. It's imperative that you be able to handle any disruptive behavior with grace. Even seasoned trainers have a hard time identifying and neutralizing troublesome behaviors and managing a class at the same time. Simple yet effective, the following tips will help

any trainer turn a wayward participant into a model one.

Ways to deal

It's best to anticipate that you'll have at least one learner who'll need special attention. You'll find that those participants generally fall into one of these categories.

Withdrawers. Aloof, quiet, and disinterested are words commonly used to describe withdrawers. At first glance,

withdrawers may not display inappropriate behaviors, but they're considered difficult because they don't provide feedback to help you gauge your effectiveness as a trainer.

If a withdrawer is in your class, take the following measures to include him or her in discussions:

- Maintain eye contact.
- Move closer to the participant.
- Pair him or her with a "supertalker."

Supertalkers. People who engage in side conversations or monopolize class time are supertalkers. Their actions distract both you and the other course members. To discourage supertalkers, establish guidelines at the beginning of the course—for example, explain that you will give everyone an opportunity to participate.

Here's what to do when you identify a supertalker:

- Use the participant's name in a positive example.
- Move closer to him or her.
- Ask the participant direct questions.
- Pair him or her with a withdrawer.

Arguers. Proving that they know more than the trainer is the favorite pastime of arguers. Usually, they're SMEs and believe there's nothing a trainer can teach them that they don't already know.

Uncooperative and domineering, arguers like to engage the trainer in time-consuming debates. If you identify such a culprit, control your emotions. If you consent to argue, you lose focus and credibility.

These tips should help you avoid the arguer's trap:

- Try not to take anything the arguer says personally.
- Turn his or her argument into a question.
- Meet with the participant in private—during a break or before or after class—to discuss his or her concerns.
- Ask the arguer to leave, if he or she is preventing the group from learning.

Monopolizers. Constantly trying to provide all of the answers, monopolizers think they have more knowledge about the course content than anyone else in the room, including the trainer. They're usually SMEs who know enough content to take over the class, and that's what they'd like to do.

If you identify a monopolizer in your midst, here are some ways to neutralize him or her:

- Break eye contact.
- Summarize his or her ideas, and move on to the next topic.
- Emphasize the importance of staying on schedule.
- Ask other participants direct questions to involve them in the discussion.

What would you do?

Dealing with monopolizers, arguers, and supertalkers can be tricky. You don't want to discourage open and honest discussion, yet you want to maintain control of the session. So, what do you do when you've taken the necessary precautions and a participant still continues to talk, argue, or disrupt your class? A, B, or C?

- A) Do nothing, and let the other participants deal with the disrupter.
- B) Dismiss class, pack your bags, and treat yourself to a much-needed vacation.
- C) Take a break, and ask the arguer whether you can address his or her concerns before or after class.

If you selected A, chances are you'll lose credibility. As a trainer, you're an SME on the training content and on how to develop, deliver, and conduct the course. Never sit back and allow a learner to control a session.

B is tempting, but take a vacation when the training is done.

If you selected C, you've made the correct choice. In the private discussion with the recalcitrant participant, remind

Rhodes Rules

So, would you like to learn how to be a better participant? Who better to ask than a few 2002 Rhodes scholars at the United States Military Academy at West Point?

When asked how to get the most out of a class, the cadets responded:

"Stop thinking of the student-teacher [or learner-trainer] relationship as adversarial.... Teachers want their students to learn and succeed. What they won't do, however, is change the standards of the course because you're doing poorly." – Robert Smith

"I'm often hesitant to slow down the pace of a class by asking questions, so I place a star next to my notes when I don't fully understand something.... Then I schedule time to talk with the instructor after class. I find the stars in my notes and ask specific questions on those topics." – Erica Watson

"At West Point, we use the Thayer Method.... It requires that students take responsibility for their own learning by reading course materials ahead of time and then using the material in support of critical thinking. It's a study habit that enables students to take meaningful notes, remember key lecture points, and perform better on exams." – Zac Miller

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him or her of the training objectives. If his or her comments are valid, address those as soon as possible.

Identify the motive

It's important to identify difficult behaviors, but it's equally important to identify the motives behind those behaviors. Establishing relationships is key to identifying the underlying motivations. Participants may have personal issues causing their behavior that have nothing to do with you or the class. A learner may be responding to external factors such as unease about organizational change. Listening to and talking with participants is the best way to uncover their motives. When all else fails, stop talking and just listen.

Don't let one difficult personality spoil the learning experience for all participants. In most cases, you can identify difficult behaviors, isolate them, and manage your sessions—all at the same time.

Qiana Charles is a professional development program specialist, San Bernardino Community College District, San Bernardino, California; qcharles@sbccd.cc.ca.us.

Send short, how-to articles on training basics to Training 101, T+D, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043. Email T101@astd.org.