

Not Your Usual Team Training

Seven steps
to turn team
training into true
tandem training.

By Davis M. Robinson

As training professionals, we have been on both sides of the training room. We've been trainers and the ones being trained. Think back to your first experience when you either trained with a partner or were taught by a pair of trainers. If it was an enjoyable and effective experience, you were likely introduced to true tandem training.

My first time training with a partner was a four-day program, and the information was unfamiliar to both of us. I can remember my partner and I getting

together about one week before the session to make sure each of us would have an equal portion of the first day. Then we agreed to get together after the first day and plan day 2. That was it! We followed that plan for the whole program. There was no discussion about our strengths, areas of uncertainty, or how we were going to approach the other days ahead. Needless to say, that turned out to be four days of extreme anxiety.

Tandem training is different from

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team training. It's about deliverance and execution. True tandem training is when two trainers work simultaneously for the same cause, always there for assurance and insurance. It's like two individuals riding a tandem bicycle—synchronized, with continuous communication and smooth transitions. Each trainer is always present and never ceases to be involved in the training.

How is that different from team training? Most of us have been involved in team situations in which someone had a personal agenda, didn't always contribute 100 percent, and sometimes wasn't even there physically. We've seen team trainers literally stumble over each other, contradict each other's statements, and be useless to his or her training partner. The reasons might have been that the team was forced to train together without proper preparation or they had personal differences and didn't want to cooperate.

What does it take?

These seven steps can help you create an effective tandem training experience.

1. Prepare together. There's nothing worse than the awful feeling of being unprepared and trying to wing it. Being unprepared can create uncertainty from the learners' point of view, as well as question the credibility of the trainers. Lack of preparation places trainers in a position to miscommunicate crucial information learners need. Meet twice before the training date at least two weeks in advance. When you meet, don't just focus on the agenda, but divide the information to be covered according to

each trainer's strengths and weaknesses. It's imperative that each trainer is comfortable with the material he or she will be covering.

2. Be responsible. When tandem training, neither trainer should be worried that the other will show up or be unprepared. Each trainer should be accountable for his or her role in delivering information to the learners. Assess your level of responsibility by answering the following questions:

- Do I know my part?
- Do I know when to do my part?
- Do I know how to do it?
- Have we well prepared?

Answering *yes* to the above questions indicates you are being responsible. Next brainstorm to see if there are any other unanswered questions. That will help to determine whether you're ready.

3. Learn each trainer's presentation style. It's just as important to know your partner's presentation style as it is to know the participants' learning styles. You'll have to feed off each other throughout the hours or days of training. Do your styles complement each other, or is there a collision? Who is more detailed? Who has the stronger personality? Decide who is stronger facilitating group discussions and who gives off better energy when leading learning games. If you have different styles, discover ways to utilize each other's strengths throughout the session. When you know each other's strengths and weaknesses, you'll be able to identify when one of you is struggling. Then you can step in to assist (not take over) without missing a beat.

4. Be accessible. Have you ever been training alone and wanted some water and had to ask a trainee to get it for you? Maybe you needed something for training that wasn't in the room, but you didn't want to interrupt the session by calling a break. One of the advantages of tandem training is you can share the work. You have someone to make notes, pass handouts, answer difficult questions, and assist with exercises while you facilitate. But remember that you too should be available to your partner as much as possible throughout the training session. If you need to leave the room, inform your partner (without bringing attention to yourself), and check to be certain you won't be needed while away.

5. Preserve character and integrity. Sometimes it can be stimulating when a learner challenges you. However, it's not so stimulating when one of the challengers is your training partner! Think about what that does. Contradictions can affect how the learners view their trainers. When tandem training, you're working towards one goal: the learners' objectives. Be aware of how you respond to a partner's inaccurate statement. Treat it as a delicate situation, and be as tactful as possible. Use such phrases

- "Would you mind if I comment or elaborate on that?"
- "Let me add...."
- "Could I interject some information?"
- "There has been some confusion in the past on this, just for clarification...."

However you do this, be sure to preserve your partner's dignity.

6. Remember the objectives. Some teams have so much fun together they can get off track with needless activities and information. That often leads to rushing through important content later in the session. I'm not saying don't have fun while training. By all means do, but be conscious of the learners' time and purpose for attending the session. Also think about your purpose. True tandem training partners have the same goal.

7. Debrief each other. Debriefing is a component of training that often isn't handled properly. It's supposed to be an informal meeting between trainers to discuss the dynamics of their session, but it can sometimes turn into a venting session. Keep in mind, the main goal for debriefing is to discuss your experiences with the session and to identify areas and opportunities for improvement. For those who tandem train with the same person consistently, debriefing probably isn't as intense as it was the first time. But it will be different each time. For those who are new to tandem training and work with new trainers consistently, it's a good opportunity to prepare for the next time you train. You should discuss what went well and what opportunities lie ahead to be more efficient and effective. If you teach the same material, discuss what you'd like to do differently next time. If you facilitated a group discussion, challenge yourself to train an unfamiliar topic or area next. Do that each time you're part of a tandem training, and take notes for the next time you're preparing a session.

A struggle with tandem training is the amount of time involved, especially before and after the actual sessions. These stages should be strategically approached to ensure proper preparation and to identify areas for improvement. The seven steps are fundamental to effective tandem training. They can help you deliver a more enjoyable training session. Mastery, however, is a lifelong learning process.

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