

No More Mister Nice Guy

By Cyndi Maxey

Self-management is essential in the current work environment. Faced with constant change and volatility, employees must be able to work and act independently. Management scholar Peter Drucker, in a recent *Training & Development* interview, declared, "I no longer teach the management of people at work, which was one of my most important courses.... I am teaching, above all, how to manage oneself."

Author Robert Kelley found that self-management is one of the strategies common to star employees. In studies at Bell Labs and 3M, Kelley discovered that stars constantly ask themselves how they can be more valuable, and they worry about what should get on their to-do lists. Self-managed people realize that it's their responsibility, not the company's, to take the initiative.

As training professionals, shouldn't we also be encouraging employee responsibility and initiative? Why not emphasize self-management in the learning environment? Recently, I conducted presentation training for one of the most dynamic, committed groups of young women I have ever encountered—a New York-based marketing team of an international cosmetics company. In the two days we worked together, I was struck by their commitment to learning—to trying everything, thriving on creative thinking, and constantly applying new concepts to their jobs. These women were not looking to be spoon-fed, nor did they agree with everything put before them. They made their own to-do lists. They were truly self-managed learners.

On the flight home, I realized how wonderful it would be if every employee in every corporate learning environment were as committed to self-management. I asked myself how I, as a professional trainer, could help make this happen. I thought about my style and that of other trainers I've trained. In my experience, most trainers are caring, listening, dynamic, intelligent, and well read. They try hard, they question, and they do their homework. Most of them are also very

nice.

For years, I have been a nice trainer. Being nice can be an asset in one's life and career, but it can be a detriment to helping others manage themselves.

I've decided that the time has come for me to stop being nice. I will continue to be empathetic, dynamic, fun-loving, and kind. But here are some things that, after more than 15 years as a trainer, I refuse to do anymore. They do nothing to help others take initiative. Why not review this list and make a self-assessment of your own niceness?

1. Over-prepare. I have spent too much time planning activities to the last detail, only to have time run out while a more important discussion took precedence. I have over-prepared what I would say and under-prepared how I would listen. The success of the learning experience is not all on the trainer's shoulders. The learners can take a discussion or an activity in the direction they need it to go, and I can become invisible.
2. Be gracious when the room isn't set up correctly. Too often I have smiled and said, "Oh, that's OK" to some meeting planner or maintenance person or administrative assistant who had agreed to be responsible for the correct room setup. From now on, I will be firm about details that are crucial for a comfortable learning environment and a successful start.
3. Tolerate a manager's last-minute decision not to attend. Study after study proves that managers need to reinforce training to make it work. The leader's presence in training is usually motivating and helpful to the transfer of learning to the job. How is the manager to know what went on if he or she wasn't there?
4. Excuse people who didn't do the prework. Once adults leave formal schooling, it seems nearly impossible to get them to do prework or homework. I have seen people with MBAs unable to write one paragraph the night before training to prepare. Prework is essential to setting the learning stage, and homework between sessions helps participants transfer concepts to their work.
5. Do all of the chart writing.

Though I am a fan of the standard flipchart and the creative thought opportunities it provides, I am tired of doing most of the charting. Others can print clearly, others can choose colors, others can get involved with the subject by being the chart writer. The main skill involved in charting information is effective listening, and everyone needs practice listening.

6. Be intimidated by techno-babblers. Participants with a grasp of techno-babble often achieve immediate status in a learning group. But these days, we all have access to some technological information, and we all know that it changes daily. In groups, it's usually considered good etiquette not to overuse the jargon of your trade to the extent that others feel intimidated or lessened. So, I will now ask techno-wizards to clarify, and I'll emphasize that it takes all kinds of wizardry to run a company.
7. Defend the material. As a trainer, I have to project a positive attitude about the topic, but I will no longer defend poorly written or outdated training materials. They should be corrected by the developers, and I'll do my job by alerting them. I will also no longer defend controversial ideas. I'll present them and energize the thinking around them, but I don't have to defend them.
8. Ignore offhand, inappropriate comments. You can find this as a recommended technique in some training books: *Ignore inappropriate comments and they will stop*. But no longer will I allow such comments, no matter how quietly made, to shatter the learning environment.
9. Give in to reasons not to take a break. Frequently, there seem to be a few people who don't want a break so they can leave early. However, the break is an important part of the learning process. It allows for socializing or quiet thinking or a quick voicemail check. It's harmful to skip breaks.
10. Tolerate floor hogs. You've met them: They're the people who delight in group events so they can take the floor about almost anything that pops into their heads. Too often, I have waited too

long for them to get to the point. There's a polite way to interrupt floor hogs: "Joe, I hear your point. Thank you. I need to move on."

11. Encourage quiet participants. Quiet people need to manage their own learning in their own way. If it means losing their status in a vocal group, then that's up to them. I am reminded of Zig Ziglar's observation: "People who never take step 1 never take step 2."

12. Allow people to leave the room without prior notice. Different corporate cultures have different rules about attendance, including late arrivals and partial absences. Telecommunications has contributed to spotty attendance. With the advent of pagers, people began to be interrupted with "a good excuse" and now with cell phones, there are more excuses. However, there is really no excuse for disrupting discussion and others' concentration.

13. Ignore people who don't play along. A learning experience works best when everyone is involved. There is no room for participants who won't join in the activity. Unless they have some physical reason or an excuse from their physician, everyone should be involved in a group discussion, role play, or project. It was required when we were in school, and it's only fair.

14. Clean up. The electricians I just hired to wire my kitchen-counter lights left behind all sorts of wire clippings and little plastic things. When I asked my brother, who happens to be an electrician, why contractors never clean up, his response was, "At my union hourly rates, does the homeowner really want me doing the sweeping?" How about it, trainers? Think of all the productive ways you could be using your time instead of throwing away people's coffee cups.

15. Pretend that I can hear. Hearing loss is affecting many baby boomers. Maybe it was the loud rock music or heredity, but I admit that I don't hear as well as I used to. Now, I'm fitted with hearing aids and ready to hear even the softest contributor.

I am committed to nurturing self-

managed employees. If you happen to be in one of my training sessions someday and see me engaged in any of these 15 acts, please remind me of my commitment. I will happily write it on the chalkboard 100 times.

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