

# Training Experts To Train

**Trainers know training**, but sometimes that isn't enough.

Maybe the topic is a little too technical. Maybe the classroom is full of die-hards who are skeptical about "those soft training types." In such cases, a subject matter expert can provide the knowledge and credibility you need.

But expert line workers and managers are not necessarily expert facilitators. This month's first "Training 101" article offers some solutions to a problem that many subject matter experts face when they face a class—how to encourage group participation. These practical suggestions can help them lead class discussions.

The second article describes how, in some cases, two trainers are better than one—if the second trainer is a subject matter expert. Here are some tips for teaming up with a line manager who knows the course content. Together, your training know-how and the expert's expertise may be the start of a really valuable learning experience—for your trainees and for both of you.

## Experts as Trainers

**By Gerald J. Wein, a consultant in training and organization development at 425 Wellington Avenue, Rochester, NY 14619.**

The content expert steps to the front of the classroom as trainer. She introduces herself and the topic, and explains that the training will be in the form of a group discussion. Unfortunately, the group has other ideas.

All too often, content experts who serve as trainers facilitating group discussions find that participants defer to them. Trainees look to the trainer for the "right" answers, rather than attempting to work through problems on their own.

## Patterns that defeat discussion

You see it when the trainer poses a hypothetical situation or asks a question, and the group members direct all comments to the trainer

for his or her approval. No discussion develops around the room; participants are interacting individually with the trainer, not each other. Rather than a group discussion, a pattern such as this one evolves and is repeated:

- a trainer question
- a participant response directed to the trainer
- a trainer comment
- silence
- a trainer question.

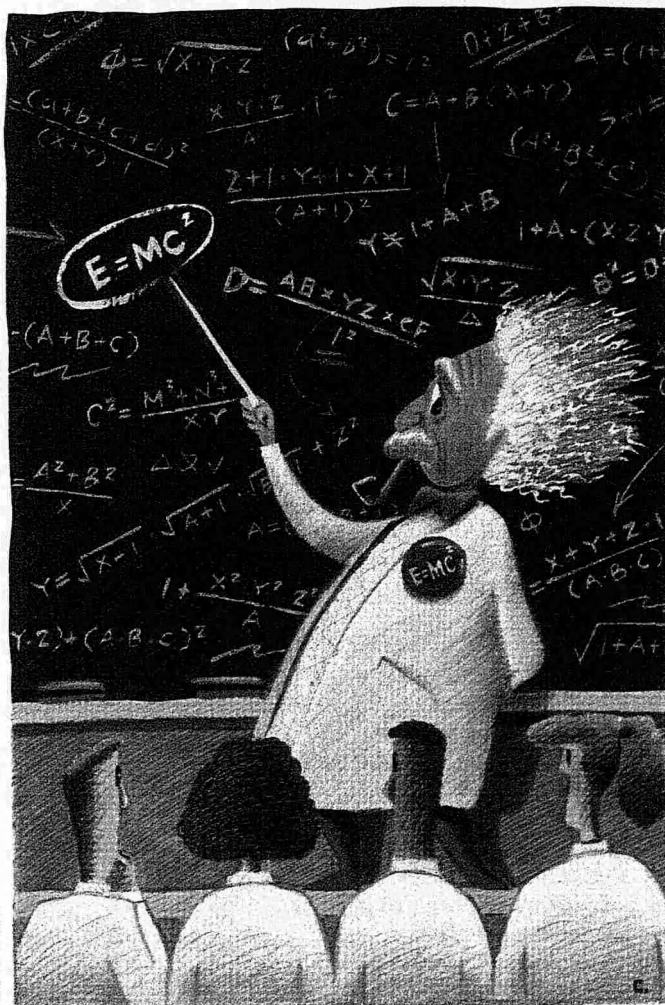
Even worse is when trainees make no comments at

all. That forces the trainer to fill in the silence, answering the question or giving a mini-lecture. Once such a pattern is established it tends to be repeated throughout the duration of the "group discussion."

If the participants were to stand back and verbalize what they are thinking in such cases, they might have comments such as these:

"I know Ellen (the trainer) has litigated this issue. She's the expert. Why can't she just tell us the answer? What's the point of this discussion? I'm sure she's already thought through the information we need to have."

"Mike (the trainer) is the only one of us who really has a handle on this topic. My comment has to go to him—not the rest of the group. I might be wrong or way off base.



David Chen

**Subject matter experts can provide the knowledge and credibility trainers need**

I trust him to tell me the right answer."

While all that is happening, what is the expert trainer thinking? Probably something like this:

"This is what I get for trying to reduce the amount of lecturing on this subject. It's fine with me if they don't want to talk about litigation opportunities under the Family Support Act. They can just sit there and take notes. This is positively the last time I'll listen to one of those training types."

### Why bother with group discussion?

A good starting point for developing a strategy that encourages discussion is to tell the class why you want to have a group discussion in the first place. In order for there to be an effective group discussion, the group has to believe that there is something to be gained by discussing the problem.

If trainees believe that the problem is a trick ("guess the part I didn't tell you about"), they may not want to play. If they believe that you don't care what they talk about (because ultimately you're going to set them straight with the "right" answer, regardless of what they say), group members may not participate.

Maybe the group members believe that you—and only you—are sitting on the information they need. If that's true, why would they want to take the time to discuss the topic with others in the group? If your information is so valuable and so unique to your experience and expertise, why would anyone want you to stop talking so that you can facilitate a discussion among equally ignorant participants?

Group discussion works best when you believe—and when the group believes that you believe—that the group working together will arrive at a far better answer than the trainer or individual members of the group would if they were working alone.

Don't make group discussion an academic exercise. An effective group can generate concerns, ques-

tions, and solutions to a problem relevant to everyone's practice.

### Expanding the expert's expertise

While much of what is discussed may already be known to you because of your greater experience with the subject matter, you must be open to the group's exploration. Together, group members may build on your knowledge and go beyond it, into new territory. If you believe in the possibility of new learning for you, you will communicate a genuine excitement to the group. Trainees' comments become important. You become a member of the group, eager to hear and take part in the discussion, not merely comment upon it.

How do you communicate your belief? Try telling the group something to this effect:

"There is no right answer to this problem, because the second circuit hasn't addressed it yet. Our discussion may help generate a strategy nobody has thought of before."

Or, "I expect that I will learn just as much from this discussion as anyone else in the group."

Or, "We are doing this training through a group discussion as a way of building issue identification and problem solving skills. Those skills can't be mastered solely by my lecturing."

### Radical thoughts

If comments are addressed only to you, reroute them or ignore them. How's this for a radical thought: You don't have to answer every question that the group asks, even those that are addressed to you. You can communicate the importance of the group interaction by not communicating at all. Ignore questions sent your way. Ignore unaddressed comments. Be patient. Perhaps another group member will respond.

Another radical thought: Try saying, "I don't know," or "I'm not sure," even if you have some idea of how to respond. Encourage others by revealing that you don't have all

the answers. When questions or comments are addressed to you, try reflecting them back to other group members; for example, "How do you react to Deb's statement, Samir?" Or, "Didn't you raise a similar concern earlier, Jane? Why don't you respond to Ed's question?"

When people begin to contribute to the discussion, expert trainers need to be supportive, providing participants with positive reinforcement for their contributions. Don't quickly jump into a group discussion to correct the most miniscule error. That behavior will reinforce the notion that group members' ideas are inferior to yours. Instead, pick your spots. Remember that it's okay for the group to "grope" its way along. Your job is to hold up a flashlight, not a stop sign. The group will learn from its mistakes and from each other.

If a serious course correction is needed you should intervene, of course, but in a supportive way. A supportive statement might sound like this: "That's an interesting comment, but not one we can address now. Can you relate your concern to a client whose mental impairment does meet a listing?"

Some comments may take the group too far afield. The key to responding to them is to support the participation but not the substance. By giving the participant a second chance to contribute, you are encouraging everyone in the group to keep trying.

Once the content-expert-turned-trainer learns to support the process of group discussion, the group will begin to build its product—true interaction and learning among all of its members.

### Partners in Training

**By Jeanne F. Glennon**, principal with *Managing Performance*, a consulting firm that specializes in productivity improvement, 790 Seventh Avenue, Suite 301, San Francisco, CA 94118.

The trainee starts out for the training room. He wonders who the

leader is going to be for today's program—a kid from the training department who doesn't know the job, or a fellow manager who talks to the lectern all day.

He enters the training room and sees not one but two people. The kid from training is there, and so is a fellow manager who understands today's topic. The trainee settles into his chair with a less sour attitude: perhaps today will turn out to be profitable after all.

Perhaps the trainee is justified in his optimism. Team teaching—which combines an experienced trainer and an experienced line manager—takes advantage of the skills of each. But team teaching works well only if training designers take certain important steps during the early phases.

**The good news**

Team teaching plays on the perceived credibility and actual skills of both parties—the trainer and the line manager.

Participants usually don't view professional trainers as knowledgeable about the job. As a result, many professional trainers pretend to have expertise that they lack, or try to gulp down a lot of specialized details. Line experts can be a valuable addition to training, because their expertise is more than perceived—it's real.

Line managers who are sent out alone to deliver training to subordinates tend to make one or all of the following mistakes:

- They lecture endlessly.
- They assume all-knowing postures.
- They play "good old boy."
- They let their impressions of participants' classroom behavior influence future performance assessments.

Even experienced line managers often fail to communicate well. They just don't know how to manage a room full of independent-minded colleagues. Many bring to mind the high-school football coach teaching American history.

The mistakes they commonly make can hinder participant learning—unless a training professional is on hand to prevent such dynam-

ics from subverting the presentation. The trainer as facilitator can manage time, handle disputes, and draw out non-contributors. In doing so, the trainer also models such behaviors for the line manager. Those facilitation skills are real, not merely perceived, and training professionals can help line managers develop them.

Line managers' involvement in team teaching creates other advantages:

- The longer and more complex the course, the more appropriate team teaching can be. Sharing the burden prevents physical and emotional strain, enables each presenter to be better prepared, and ensures backup in case a plane is late or traffic is heavy.
- Frequently, the line manager knows the participants personally, can predict their behavior, and can quickly adopt an appropriate relationship with each one.
- Some training programs must deliver policy messages throughout far-flung corporations. In such cases, regional managers can meet with all their subordinates in a few weeks, by team-teaching with trainers.

**The bad news**

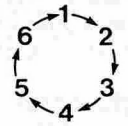
No system works well 100 percent of the time. All training experts have worked with line managers in defining goals, gathering content, and arranging for attendance. As most trainers know, some managers provide more obstacles than help.

Managers may try to take over a program and change a sound training design. They are occasionally assigned to present policies or concepts they don't agree with; such a situation can make anyone difficult to work with.

Delays often result from changes in personnel. Line managers may be promoted or reassigned; they may retire. Who knows where they disappear to when you need them? Such delays may seriously compromise a program—and a trainer's reputation.

Team teaching can smooth out or prevent some of the pitfalls that are often present in trainers' other dealings with line managers. That's

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because team teaching demands collaboration on the design and development of materials, as well as shared responsibility for delivery. The results publicly link the line manager with the project. Ownership—as well as self-preservation—breeds commitment.

### Time spent upfront

The development phase is critical; effective team teaching must start well before delivery. The time spent upfront on a program makes it clear: this is a cooperative effort. Both trainer and line manager will be seen as responsible for the program.

If the manager has a negative attitude toward the training, it will become apparent early in the development phase, and the trainer can deal with it. Managers frequently have good reasons for being negative; resolving valid objections will improve the training.

Sometimes managers unknowingly cause problems that delay work on training programs. When the manager—not the training department—is on the line for results, such problems tend to disappear. Also, last-minute changes in a program are less likely when the responsible person is involved from the start.

The only way to know the material thoroughly is to help create it. People who develop material usually give more thorough presentations and are better able to answer unexpected questions.

No matter how explicit a leader's guide tries to be, some points are not apparent to new instructors—or to trainers who aren't content experts. The line manager who helped in development of the material knows, for example, the subtleties that need to be stressed in a case study. The manager who helped in the development of training material understands why it is formatted in certain ways. With that knowledge, the manager is better able to reinforce training techniques, rather than fight against them.

During the development stage, the trainer must convince the line expert that training techniques are integral to the process, not op-

tional. A manager may resist waiting through silent periods, questioning rather than lecturing, or using various media. It's up to the trainer to help the manager understand the techniques beforehand, practice them, and feel comfortable with them. It takes time to coach, provide feedback, and build confidence. The manager can rehearse and drill along with the trainer, practicing new skills first in a safe setting.

### Sharing the spotlight

Training professionals must respect the specialized skills and expertise of line managers. But when a manager is on unfamiliar turf, the training professional must assume control of the presentation.

The trainer begins the workshop by introducing the content and the process; she or he explains how team teaching works. Without stooping to training jargon, the trainer discusses the objectives, criteria, and expectations for the session.

If the introductory material is not too complex, the trainer presents it, thus showing some control over the content. The trainer then introduces the line manager as the subject matter expert.

Participants immediately recognize the relationship between the trainer and the line manager. If the manager respects and understands the trainer's position, the participants will accept it also.

The trainer takes control of all training activities. That may include leading small group work, brainstorming role plays, or leading exercises. The trainer remains aware of the interaction—who is falling asleep, what idea just fell on deaf ears, and whether questions are being addressed.

### Just rewards

The rewards for the training professional are apparent. With a line expert on hand to help lead the training, the program has more credibility than it would if a trainer were leading it alone. Better credibility translates to increased acceptance of new material.

Clearly, the skills learned in train-

ing can be useful to the manager in other aspects of work. Improved listening and questioning techniques can enhance communication in the work group. Also, a successful presentation enhances a manager's image among colleagues. In these and other ways, managers benefit from team training experiences.

Still, more tangible rewards and incentives can heighten a manager's enthusiasm for participating in a training project. The training professional can reward the managers' participation in various ways, and may be able to negotiate even more attractive incentives from the organization. Such rewards may include the following:

- credit for volunteering for extra assignments
- bonus points toward promotions
- notice in company publications
- a thank-you letter to a manager's manager from as senior an executive as you can muster
- an annual group function for all managers who have participated in training programs.

An added plus is the increase in mutual respect that team teaching can foster. During the time spent working on the project, line managers often develop an appreciation for training as a technology, while trainers are reminded of the content knowledge and expertise of line managers.

In the long run, team teaching can improve the relevance of the training to the job, and improve acceptance of new skills. With that kind of payoff, it's a technique well worth trying.

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**"Training 101"** is edited by **Catherine M. Petrini**. Send your short articles for consideration to *Training 101*, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.