

# "WINNING THROUGH ALLEVIATION"

BY MELISSA LEIFER

As much as I hate to admit it, there is a difference in acceptable classroom style for female and male training specialists. What do I mean by acceptable? Basically, "acceptable" means positively received by the audience; and "acceptable" style, therefore, means a lecture or leadership style which will yield favorable reactions from the trainees. Careful observation over the last three years has enabled me to identify common mistakes made by females in the trainer role, and to further categorize these errors into general areas. This article is written to share the resulting guidelines with other women who are professional trainers in industry.

Obviously, a significant factor in any evaluation should be the quality of information that was conveyed in the session. But, any trainer knows that the delivery of the information does impact the results of the evaluation. Even if the trainer imparts valuable information or skills, the audience can-

not help but have a personal reaction to the presenter or leader. The areas which are most often problematic to the female trainer, in particular, break down this way: (1) establishing authority, (2) the feminist issue, (3) use of humor, and (4) profanity.

## Establishing Authority

When a disturbance arises in class, particularly when a female is faced with an audience of male professionals, her immediate problem may be one of establishing control. It is said that "*a woman must be twice as accomplished as a man to be one-half as successful.*" In the training session, where authority is concerned, this is usually true.

Some women elect to handle this challenge by being openly assertive, strongly opinionated, or by taking an authoritarian stance in the classroom. In this case, the audience may feel (and reflect in their evaluations) that "*she is trying to prove something.*" Other women deal with the problem by projecting warmth, and being emotionally supportive in the classroom. Their audiences tend to

interpret this style as "weak," with comments ranging from "*I don't want to be babied*" to "*afraid to control the class,*" and "*could not keep on track . . . easily led into extraneous discussions.*" It would seem that she is "damned" if she does, as well as if she doesn't.

In one session, early in my career, a young man openly ignored the lecture by obviously reading *The Wall Street Journal* in class. In this case, obvious means that he held the double page out in front of him, in plain sight. No subtlety about it. Hostile, you say? After the first hour of my session, I decided to establish my authority and deal with his rudeness by walking quietly down from the dais, where I was speaking, and setting fire to his newspaper, as he read it. For a moment it was chaotic. His uncensored response is chronicled in the Training Class history books. The audience thought it was hysterical. There was no question as to my authority in the classroom after that incident. There was also a decided "her against us" atmosphere, which yielded the worst set of evaluations that I have ever re-

ceived.

Control is an issue which cannot be ignored. The tactic I described in the incident was an approach which my male predecessor had used very successfully on an occasion which I observed. I made the mistake of thinking that what was good for the goose . . . etc. But rather than dwell on what a woman cannot do, let me suggest an approach which *does* work.

The female trainer must clearly control the classroom activity and response. Usually, good command of subject matter and enthusiastic delivery will accomplish this. Participants sense that the lecturer or leader has something good to offer. At the first sign of resistance from the audience or of "testing" through questions or statements designed to catch the trainer off-guard or unprepared, a "win-win" situation must be created. Especially when time is being improperly used, the lecturer *must* interrupt and redirect the class. This must be done firmly, but without unpleasantness. She may interrupt, for instance, and say "I think I understand your question, but I believe it may be best for us to discuss that issue during a break, or after class. Unfortunately, the subject matter at hand doesn't allow us much flexibility with time."

This way, you have established control, remained mindful of the needs of the class, and you have not implied that the question or statement made by the particular trainee was unnecessary or frivolous. The stronger approach — "I'm sorry, we just don't have time for that now" — will imply disregard for feelings, create a you-them situation in which the class will side with its own against you.

In the case of the hostile heckler, who will not be deterred, and continues to test, a private conference is in order. At the first opportunity for privacy, the participant should be taken aside for a quiet discussion. I recommend that you use the Norman Vincent Peale approach in this situation; that is, you assume guilt and ask for clarification. It goes like this: "Joe, I can feel that you are upset with me from your

questions (or comments), and I'm sure that you wouldn't be this adamant (or unkind, or suspicious) if I hadn't done something to deserve it. Please, tell me what I've done so that we can settle it now and get it out in the open before class reconvenes."

In eight of the 10 cases, the participant will apologize for his behavior, claim that there is no problem, and assure you that his questions were strictly for information. Everyone goes back to class, and the disturbance magically disappears. In most instances, this participant will turn out to be your strongest supporter from then on. Although the balance of the trainees are unaware of your conference, they will sense or observe the change, and credit you for the classroom improvement.

The basic difference between male and female techniques for establishing authority has to do with willingness to create a confrontation. In the eyes of the class, it is thoroughly unacceptable for a wo-

man to "beat" a man. Confrontational tactics are probably not always successful for men, either, but the audience is less likely to penalize a male trainer through the evaluations than a female. It is necessary for women to be strong but not strident in order to achieve maximum effectiveness.

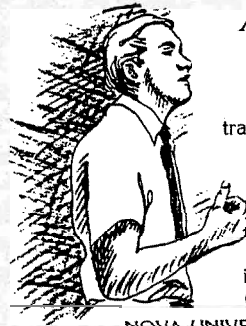
### The Feminist Issue

No matter how attractive or unattractive, assertive or supportive a female class leader is, she is still subject to an undercurrent of "women's lib" resentment in the classroom. Perhaps because of the presence of the ERA in the newspapers, or simply because the participants' secretaries are now refusing to get them coffee, the question hangs in the air: "How careful do I have to be? What if I forget to say salesperson?" Since this awareness usually creates discomfort in the trainees, there is often intentional comment made so that the leader's reaction can be observed.

In general, it is fair to say that

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the issue of women's liberation should be left out of classroom discussions. Just as a trainer would normally avoid religious or philosophical subjects, the equality of women in business or the superiority of either sex in relation to the other is a subject that does not warrant airing in public. The reason that religion and politics make such good cocktail party conversation, is that regardless of the length of the conversation, it is not likely that any original feelings or opinions will be changed as a result.

Since it is highly unlikely that a discussion of feminism in the classroom will change the existing feelings of the participants, it can only antagonize, or, at the very least, create a "we-her" situation. However, avoiding the subject does not make it go away. What I am saying is that an in-depth discussion is out of place, but some recognition is in order. If you don't bring it up, someone else will.

In a case study session I ran recently, one of the incidents had to do with charting the performance of the secretaries in an office, as a way to increase their productivity. Each group was asked to comment on the motivational psychology being used. One manager's response was: "Women would hate the competitive setup. They simply can't stand the pressure." I knew that my response was going to be carefully weighed, so I decided to try humor. "Well," I said, "rather than discuss the sex-related issue, let's change the example so that these are all male secretaries — of course, everyone knows that men would love the competition and the pressure." The class laughed, and so did I; the tension was broken. I had neither attempted to deride his response, nor change his opinion. Now, we could set the issue aside, or use it for humor when necessary.

#### "Don't Ignore the Subject"

My recommendation to other women who find themselves on the dais is that you do not try to ignore the subject, nor wait for a participant to address it for you. Deal with it. Use humor if you can, and make it your joke. Since learning this lesson, I find a reason in the beginning of each session to make some remark about my male secretary (I really have one!), and how terrible he is with details. Of course, it must be clearly understood from your delivery that you are kidding. If that remark doesn't get the response I am looking for, I add something like: "All my life I've wanted to have a male secretary. I couldn't wait to be able to say, 'I'll have my boy do it!'" This, I have found, sets up good natured joking about feminism, and generally puts the class at ease.

If these styles do not appeal to you, a simple disclaimer will work just as well, such as: "Please forgive me if I use the word salesman, or fail to say he/she is in my examples. I am really not sexist — sometimes I just forget." If you acknowledge that you, too, are "human" and not oversensitive, the class is free to forget their concern and respond to the subject matter being studied. And to you,

as a professional. Any honest statement which encourages comfort of the audience, and maintains yours, will do.

Regardless of which approach you choose, the straightforward or the humorous, what you must convey is a desire to eliminate any impediment to your effectiveness in the classroom. You have undoubtedly developed the skills to create rapport in the class. These skills are especially important in handling this matter. A male trainer does not have to deal with this, for obvious reasons. A female cannot avoid it. If you address it first, you're not as likely to be caught off-guard, or to make the area more sensitive/serious than it need be. After all, if it's your joke, they'll laugh with you.

#### Use Humor

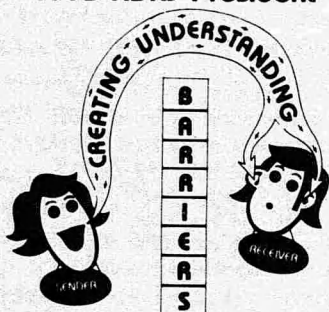
As a trainee in sales training classes some years ago, I can remember the lectures of male trainers very clearly. In those years, the standard technique required that you open every session with a joke. Now, many of these lecturers were hardly stand-up comics, and their attempts at humor were miserable failures. Nevertheless, humor was essential to good evaluation results, so. . .

Humor is still essential to classroom lecture style. Now, however, like almost everything else in our culture, the popular humor is subject-related. Like Woody Allen's movies, the joke is no longer a Henny Youngman story or a funny name, but natural, situational humor that involves a play on words or simple irony. In many cases, the play on words is double entendre. This can be genuinely funny, and, because of the shock value, can yield satisfying audience response. Unfortunately, for a woman lecturer or leader, it is unacceptable to the audience. Somehow, if a woman's one-liners have a sexual connotation, she communicates to the predominantly male audience an awareness that they would prefer she not acknowledge. Cultural conditioning dictates that women should be "innocent," and the casual use of double meanings belies that impression.

I suffered this consequence in a

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management training session on sensitivity. We were discussing the need for a manager to clearly understand the problems of his subordinates before he reacted to their perceived nonperformance. I was making a point relating to the importance of this fact-finding when I said, *"What if you discover, after publicly chewing out a subordinate, that he has a major personal problem that the entire office knows about except you? Now, they think you are an insensitive clod who would chew out an employee, even though his wife, his mistress, and his mortgage are all overdue."* A roar went up from the crowd. They loved the line. And, after the session was over, a serious manager came into my office and said: *"Were you always hard, or did this company make you that way?"* Needless to say, that is not the professional image I cared to convey.

A part of this problem has to do with the level of sexual energy communicated by the woman to her participants. Particularly if she is an attractive speaker, sex-related comments have probably been made by members of the audience, either to themselves, or openly, to each other. By drawing their attention to the subject of sex directly, you have reduced the concentration on the subject of your session. This is counterproductive.

Also, women are likely to be victims of what I call "The Lawn Mower Syndrome." This "disease" relates to the old joke about the next door neighbor who wants to borrow your lawn mower. On his way to your door, he recalls that he borrowed your hedge clippers last year and never returned them. He knows that you will remember the hedge clippers when he asks for the lawn mower and refuse to loan again. Getting progressively more uncomfortable as he approaches your house, he works himself into anger. You answer the doorbell and he says: *"Keep your damned lawn mower!"*

A similar process goes on in the training class. The single, attractive, female instructor is viewed by the participants as a potential

date. While considering how to approach you, the trainee begins to think that if he finds you attractive enough to ask out, others in the room are probably thinking the same thing. This means that you are probably asked out by many trainees, and if you have any sense at all, you don't accept these invitations. Voila! *"Keep your damned lawn mower"* (since I can't have it anyway)."

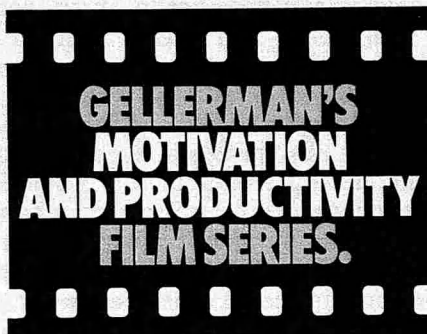
At this point, any sexual innuendo used by you, will be interpreted as teasing; as "rubbing salt in the wound." It will antagonize in those cases, rather than amuse. That anger, however sublimated, will show up on your evaluation results. If you have any other options, avoid the double entendre. It is fun for a while, but it will exact its price — both in your level of effectiveness, and in the reaction to your presentation. Do not, however, cut out humor. Rely on subject-related comments, where appropriate — on irony and even on craziness. Humor relieves tension, makes you "human" as an instructor, and provides necessary breaks in concentration. If used well, and not carried to extremes, it can be the single biggest asset in your classroom delivery style.

#### Reaction to Profanity

Closely related, I would guess, to the audience reaction to sexual innuendo, is the reaction to profanity when used by women in class. Just as women were not supposed to smoke on the street, or drink in the pubs, they are not supposed to join in the free use of swear words or vulgar expression, no matter how commonplace in the business environment. I am not sure who wrote those rules, but, even if unspoken, they are a factor in the audience reaction to a woman who breaks them.

In a very recent example of this, a woman sales trainer (with whom I am friendly) used the word "bullshit" in one of her classes. When there were no apparent after-effects, she began to believe that she could relax, and respond honestly to the discussions that were subsequent, using whatever language she was at home with. After the last of three sessions, the

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evaluations were collected. Over 60 per cent of the participants complained specifically about her "bad taste" and use of foul language. "We don't need a refugee from the streets," they wrote. She was devastated.

The real problem here is the distinct difference in the reaction to profanity or vulgarity when delivered by male trainers rather than female. When a male uses the commonplace business vernacular, he is interpreted as "being one of the boys." Apparently, men think nothing of using various expletives when not in mixed company. It is when a woman is present that discomfort occurs.

Cultural training dictates that the woman should be sheltered from ugliness. If the woman presents herself as familiar, even comfortable, with profanity, the audience becomes disoriented. No matter that intellectually they know that women in business have "heard it all before," it is socially unacceptable for her to acknowledge that awareness. The use of

profane language and vulgar expressions conveys a definite feeling that the leader or lecturer is trying to hard to gain acceptance, and simultaneously trying to deny her traditional female role.

It is difficult, on occasion, for women speakers to accept this prohibition. They feel that their choice of language should be their own business. They take their cues from their male co-worker, and assert that the discomfort in the audience is not their problem. Let's face it, excising the vernacular from your language is not only difficult for the speaker, but it eliminates almost all the usual phrases that can be used to underscore your feelings. Nevertheless, I recommend that you respect this unwritten rule, no matter how foolish or unfair it may seem.

#### **"Classroom is Not a Battleground"**

The classroom, or dais, is not profitably used as a battleground, particularly when the issues are emotionally based. It is not logical to expect years of cultural training to drop away just because we want them to. If a woman training professional wishes to be effective, she cannot afford to allow any personal style to interfere with the class' concentration on the subject. This does not mean that she must attempt to be someone else, or play an unfamiliar role, but that she must control certain of her habits to facilitate accomplishing her objective. At the very least, she will develop a better vocabulary, and the ability to create very precise, original verbal images. What is so wrong with that?

It is not the intent of this article to bemoan the existence of sexism, nor to encourage women to stifle their means of expression. From personal experience with over 3,000 trainees, I have learned that these issues and attitudes play a very important part in the level of acceptance I receive from an audience. All the lessons recounted here, are lessons that I have learned the hard way. I assumed that I would be effective if I were honest and knew my subject. I discovered, to my dismay, that other elements impact my results.

Neither is it the intent of this piece to imply that men can use all the vernacular, sexual innuendo, and confrontational techniques without suffering negative reactions. However, in the majority of cases, when these styles have been used by men, the audience reaction evaluations are neither as adamant nor as vindictive.

#### **Success Guidelines**

It is the simple truth that women who assume a leadership role will probably be more successful if they follow the guidelines outlined here: (1) Create a win-win atmosphere for resolving conflict and establishing authority; (2) Deal with the underlying feminist issue before it is raised by a participant, and preferably, with humor; (3) Avoid double entendre, and direct sexual innuendo when being humorous; (4) Don't be profane or vulgar, no matter how accepted the language or phrase may be in the business circle.

In any presentation, good common sense dictates that you will be more successful if you anticipate possible problems and defuse them at the outset. Obviously, as you know your audience better, the guidelines may change to reflect increasing familiarity. You will develop the ability to sense "acceptable style." In the beginning, however, it is probably better to live by Murphy's Law. After all, the evaluation is the only outlet for participant hostility, if any was created; it is also the only tangible evidence of your performance. If, without diminishing your self-image, you can tilt the results in your favor, isn't it worth a try? You will increase your skills in creating rapport, sharpen your wit, increase your vocabulary, and get markedly better ratings from your audience. After all, why should we work so hard to be equal, when we've been superior all these years?

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