

# Cold Course?

By Jill Foster

## How to prepare when the material isn't your own.

I WORK for a training department that has changed significantly over the past five years. As a result, the way we learn the material we facilitate has changed as well. In the past, if I created the material, I also taught the class. Consequently, I did little to prepare because I already understood how the material was supposed to flow and the purpose behind each exercise and question.

But currently, we purchase programs off the shelf or other in-house team members create the material. So teaching the information is not always as easy. For example, a colleague was preparing to teach her first off-the-shelf soft skills class, and I asked if she was excited about it. She said, "Yes, so it will be over with." When pressed for more detail, she said she didn't feel comfortable with how the course was supposed to flow. I then asked what preparation she did up to that point. Like many of us who are new to facilitating material created by someone else, her response was, "I've read the facilitator guide a bunch of times."

While there are many ways to prepare for a class, the definition of preparing doesn't change. Regardless of individual style, being prepared means knowing what comes next and how to facilitate, determining what questions will help participants understand the material, identifying what questions they are likely to ask, and having relevant examples ready.

### Read actively

My colleague was on the right track by reading the guide, but she didn't get the most out of the material. Instead, she should have read it actively, several times, focusing on a different aspect of the course each time. Here's how.

The first time through, read the guide to understand how it flows. Are there activities? What are the key points for each activity? An overview sheet is a useful tool for capturing this information in an at-a-glance fashion. On a sheet of paper, create three columns and label them "topic," "activity," and "time." Use your overview sheet to take notes as you read through the guide. The idea is not to list all of the instructions, but to provide information about what is happening in the program and when.

Our goal as facilitators is to help participants reach an "a-ha" moment. Two vital tools for achieving that are discussion questions and activities. So don't forget to read the questions in the guide. Remember, they were probably written for a broad audience, and you most likely are working with an audience that has a more specific need. So, review the questions and ask yourself: Are they clear? How do I expect participants to answer? What additional questions can I ask?

On the next read, analyze activities. Are they interactive enough? Are there adequate opportunities to practice the skill? Think about ways you can enhance the activities. Because you know your company's culture, try to predetermine how your group will respond to each activity. What questions, objections, or observations are likely to surface?

For example, in my company there are two different divisions; what is well received by one group is met with great skepticism by the other. In a recent interviewing skills class, people from both divisions participated. Their task was to analyze an applicant's answer and what it revealed about the candidate. The applicant was asked, "How do you deal with change?" His response was, "When I find out about change, I look at how it is going to affect other issues. If I have any concerns, I raise them to my boss. I apply the change to my processes."

One group interpreted the response to mean that the candidate was proactive and communicated openly. The other group felt that the applicant would be difficult to manage and was a "pot stirrer."

Because I accounted for the possibility of different viewpoints during my preparation, I was able to steer and keep the discussion on the key point more easily and tie it back into previously discussed concepts about the qualities of successful managers.

### Practice

Imagine going to a play where the actors have read the script, but didn't rehearse prior to show time. Would that theater experience meet your expectations? Probably not.

After facilitating a class, most of us can pinpoint the things we would do differently. But, rehearsing aloud gives us a chance to find out what we can change or improve before we get in front of a group. It also helps us discover which sentences and ideas can serve as cues for the next.

Many facilitator guides have several instructions stating, "Read this," followed by a long paragraph. The inclusion of those directions, however, implies one of two things: You are going to be reading to your participants or you are going to try to memorize all of the material. Obviously, both notions are problematic. Remember, it's not the actual words that are important, but rather the ideas behind them. As you read through the passages, look for key points. Highlight or write them in the margins. As you practice, focus on them and change the prepared wording to make it sound like your own.

If you are not comfortable practicing the entire course or are in a time crunch, focus only on the introduction, transitions, conclusion, and any other areas you find difficult. If those flow well, participants tend to be more forgiving of other missteps.

Staring at a facilitator's guide without a starting point can be overwhelming and take the joy out of facilitating. But, reading through the guide with a plan of action can help you feel prepared, relieve pressure, and create an effective learning experience for the participants.

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