

Training 101

Arranging the Training Room—and the Trainer

Like Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, good trainers are always prepared. But preparing a lesson plan isn't enough. For a truly successful training session, you also need to create an atmosphere—and a trainer—that are conducive to learning.

For example, have you considered your training room? Have you taken a good look at the lighting conditions, the windows, the noise level, and the seating arrangement?

OK, maybe you don't have much choice in the matter. Maybe this is the only room available. Maybe management won't let you cut a few windows, install new lighting, and knock out a wall or two. You still should be aware of how the training environment may be affecting your session. And, you should know of a few simple and inexpensive ways to manipulate the environment to make the most of what you've got.

Now take a look at yourself. An experienced actress, director, and trainer tells you how to prepare yourself—body, mind, and voice—for the podium.

Environmental Psychology: a Trainer's Wish List

George Sweet, a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army, is chief of the military personnel branch at Winn Army Community Hospital, Fort Stewart, GA 31314.

Training is a multifaceted area. A training program with crystal-clear objectives and audiovisual materials more advanced than a science-fiction movie can still fail if the trainer does not take into account the effects of the training environment. Environmental psychology seeks to determine the dimensions of the environment that influence human activities. The goal is to match the physical environment with the people using it.

The merger of environmental psychology and training is appropriate. In order to achieve high levels of interaction, the trainer must make the participants feel comfortable in the classroom environment; that goal can be achieved by using the principles of environmental psychology.

Shedding light on the subject

The belief that reading in poorly lit areas can damage your eyes is a myth. However, good lighting conditions can enhance reading performance. Different people have different preferences about lighting, so it is best to have varying intensities of light in a training facility. A training room with uniform lighting is dull; contrast stimulates the learners' sense of vision. But, although contrasts of light are beneficial to the classroom environment, extreme contrasts should be avoided; they can cause eye strain, tiredness, and general discomfort.

As a general rule, brightly lit areas attract attention. Therefore, materials used in training should be at least as bright as the surrounding areas. You can manipulate the environment by increasing or decreasing the amount of light in certain areas, thereby controlling the focus of attention. For example, you may want to have chalkboards lit more brightly than the walls of the classroom.

Not everybody has perfect eyesight; help those who don't by increasing the intensity of light or moving visual aids closer to vision-impaired participants.

There are two main types of lighting—natural and artificial. Both have advantages and disadvantages.

Natural light (sunlight)

- is free;
- can be controlled by blinds and curtains;
- can cause glare;
- is unpredictable.

Artificial light (incandescent or fluorescent)

- can be controlled by a switch;
- can be costly;

- can cause fatigue and headaches;
- produces a cold, detached atmosphere.

Trainers should attempt to use natural light as the main light source, with artificial light to emphasize certain areas of the environment. Windows on at least two adjacent walls will give you the greatest amount of sunlight. Walls with windows should be painted light colors to avoid sharp contrasts with the sunlight.

As the quality of lighting increases, so does student performance. High-quality lighting makes people more comfortable and allows them to identify words more easily when reading.

A room with a view

Most people prefer buildings with windows to buildings without windows. Windowless environments can lead to decreased interest, reduced value of work, and low satisfaction with physical working conditions. Windowless environments are particularly disturbing to people who do sedentary or routine tasks, because neither their work nor their environment provides stimulation.

Windows have two main functions in the workplace.

■ **Environmental information** allows people to be aware of changing weather conditions and the approximate time of day.

■ **Environmental stimulation** refers to the visual stimuli provided by the view. The need for environmental stimulation has been documented in several experiments at hospitals and prisons. People tend to have better physical and psychological health when they have attractive surroundings. So it is beneficial for people to view nature settings when they have to be in indoors.

People in windowless buildings generally decorate their environments more than do people in buildings with windows, and the

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decorations they use tend to be nature-related. If you can't get a training room with windows overlooking a beautiful natural scene (and who can?) try faking a natural setting with nature posters, plants, flowers, fish tanks, terrariums, and outdoor sporting equipment such as fishing poles and golf clubs.

Noise annoys—sometimes

Individual preferences about noise levels in the training environment must be taken into account in selecting a place for training. Some kinds of performance—for example, those that involve verbal learning—appear to improve with noise, but spatial and pictorial learning seem to be more difficult in noisy conditions. Noise detracts from performance in unfamiliar tasks and from the performance of highly intelligent people on routine tasks. In general, the complexity of a task can be increased by the presence of noise.

Since noise affects pictorial or spatial learning, trainers should be aware that audiovisual aids have limited usefulness in noisy environments.

People can adapt to the presence of noise in their environments, but adaptation is harder when the learning task is complex—resulting in a stimulus overload—and when the noise is unpredictable—leading to high levels of frustration and poor performance. But when students can control the noise in their environment (for example, by unplugging a noisy fan), performance improves and frustration levels decrease.

High-intensity noise (such as that of airplanes, trains, and construction equipment) is often accompanied by poor performance, low tolerance for frustration, and difficulty in resolving conflict. There are several reasons for that connection:

- People in noisy environments block out both relevant and irrelevant environmental cues.

- Training time can be decreased by as much as 11 percent due to noise disturbance.

- Learners may not be able to hear the instructor.

On the other hand, bursts of noise can also result in an increase in the quality of performance, due to greater concentration. And, environments with extremely low levels of noise can intensify distractions by making irrelevant noises (such as toe tapping and breathing) more easily heard. So at times, noise can be beneficial to training activities, especially when time demands are not tight and accuracy of detail is not vital.

Pack 'em in

Many people believe that crowding can cause such problems as anxiety, aggressiveness, and violence. But in the training environment, it has few disastrous results, unless combined with a high level of physical interaction.

Feeling crowded is not necessarily dependent on the number of people present or the amount of space available. Other factors such as heat, odor, air flow, and cleanliness can affect a person's perception of how crowded a room is.

When you have to have a lot of people packed into a small space, design the session so that people can work individually, with no need for physical interaction. Lecturing works better than role-playing or certain instructional games if space for individual movement is limited.

Classical columns and quality circles

The location of students in a classroom can affect the trainer, the students, and the teaching methods. Different seating arrangements facilitate different kinds of instruction.

Several experiments have supported the existence of an "action zone" in the traditional row-and-column classroom seating arrange-

ment. The "action zone" consists of the area in the front and center of the classroom, in which student-teacher interaction is highest.

Students with high verbal skills are likely to choose central seats; students with low verbal skills tend to choose peripheral seats. Research indicates that seating arrangements significantly affect students with high and moderate verbal skills, but have no effect on students with low skills in that area.

Basically, students sit in places where they are best able to reach their goals. For example, students who prefer one-to-one interaction with the trainer sit in the front of the room; students who want to socialize with each other sit in the back of the room. Students with mixed goals (learning and socializing) usually sit in the middle of the class. Introverted students are likely to sit along windows or walls in order to isolate themselves from others. Sitting near the door provides a student with a quick escape from the classroom.

A trainer can adjust the classroom environment to meet his or her objectives. A circular seating arrangement facilitates informal, on-task discussion in which students are encouraged to speak without being called on. Arranging the seats in clusters encourages less pupil interaction but makes for fewer out-of-order comments. Circles and clusters are usually more effective seating arrangements than the traditional rows and columns, which increase student withdrawal and off-task behavior.

A working environment

Environmental factors influence the ways in which people learn, but different people respond to them differently. Trainers should keep in mind the principles of environmental psychology when setting up a training room, in order to create an environment that is comfortable and conducive to learning.

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Making Nervousness Work for You

Nathalie Donnet is director of the Studio for Effective Expression, 27 Forsyth Avenue South, Hamilton, Ontario, L8S 2A4, Canada, and author of Power Presentations on the Business Stage.

Some speech experts say, "Never be nervous again!" I don't think that's possible. But you can make nervousness work for you when you have to speak in public.

Actors do it. As formidable as they can be in rehearsals, they never reach the levels of brilliance they can attain during performances before live audiences. Why? Because nervousness acts like a shot of adrenalin. Experienced performers in all fields feel it, but know how to control it. They know that uncontrolled nervousness can ruin the most carefully prepared presentation.

Forty-nine percent of people polled claim they would rather die than speak in public. When I ask participants in my training sessions for reasons, they reply, "We're afraid of making fools of ourselves." But with proper preparation, adequate and appropriate rehearsal, and the mastery of a few skills, trainers and others who must speak to audiences can develop confidence and presence, and learn to use their own nervousness to heighten their performances.

Nervous habits

A person who is subject to stage fright may demonstrate any or all of the following signs of nervousness when giving a presentation:

- dry mouth;
- scratchy throat that constantly needs clearing;
- butterflies in the stomach;
- loosening a tie that isn't tight;
- buttoning and unbuttoning a jacket;
- rocking back and forth;

- shifting from one hip to the other;
- moving hands in and out of pockets;
- inability to look audience in the eye;
- playing with change in pockets;
- playing with jewelry, glasses, or objects on a table.

There are dozens more, but the question is—What can you do about them?

Relaxation techniques, good posture, and proper breathing control can help alleviate signs of nervousness and enhance your delivery skills. Mastering a few simple exercises can yield dramatic results.

Exercises for relaxation

The opposite of tension is relaxation, and you can learn to attain ultimate relaxation within a few moments.

Start by creating almost unbearable tension, so great that your entire body trembles. Stand up straight, feet together. Then, begin tensing your toes. In the next few moments, you'll create tension in all the muscles of the body right up to and including the head—toes, feet, calves, thighs, hips, fingers, wrists, arms, lower abdomen, chest, shoulders, neck, jaw, eyes, and forehead.

When you can no longer stand it, when your entire body is shaking with tension, relax quickly into a rag-doll position, arms dangling toward the floor, knees sagging, head hanging loosely. Then try the exercise again.

During the moment of complete tension, you might find yourself becoming angry for no reason; tension does that. But just try to be angry in the rag-doll position. Think of something that usually makes you furious. You can't do it, can you? How can you possibly become angry when you're relaxed? I always tell people in my seminars to try that exercise as they are about to explode into arguments with their spouses or housemates. Do it. You'll

both burst out laughing, and the anger will pass.

You can modify that exercise to do before any training session, presentation, report, or meeting. Sit behind a desk or table, keeping the upper part of your body relaxed. Start the same way you did while standing up—tense the toes and then the feet, and on up. But keep the tension below the desk or table; you don't want the audience to observe the mechanics. Concentrate on your feet, hands, hips, and lower abdomen. After four or five times, your hands will have lost that clammy, cold feeling and your entire body will feel energized and ready to go.

Combine that relaxation technique with several other exercises before any speaking engagement. It can be a simple but effective addition to your preparation for training sessions.

Correct body alignment

Good posture is absolutely essential for good voice production. It also gives speakers a sense of presence and well-being.

Be truthful now—as soon as you read "good posture," didn't you brace your body upright and square your shoulders? Had you been standing instead of sitting, you might have gone into a military brace, chest thrown forward, shoulders back, neck pulled in, chin doubled, spine arched—all the worst things you can do.

Standing straight does not mean looking as if you have swallowed a broomstick. For good posture, imagine that you are being pulled toward the ceiling by a string attached to the top of your head: tuck your hips under slightly to avoid a swayback position, relax shoulders in a casually forward position, pull your abdominal muscles in and your torso straight up from the waist.

It's not as complicated as it sounds. Try standing with your back to a wall and your heels a few

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inches away from it. Your feet should be slightly apart. Check the following points to ensure that your posture is aligned:

- The crown of your head is high, not touching the wall.
- Your head is in a comfortable position; it turns easily in all directions.
- The back of your neck is extended slightly, but not stretched.
- The front of your neck is relaxed, not stretched.
- Shoulders are slightly sloped, not touching the wall.
- The middle of your back touches the wall.
- Spine is in easy contact with wall from pelvis to upper back.
- Pelvis is tilted forward. The small of your back in against the wall; check with your hand to make sure you can't feel a space between the small of your back and the wall.
- Your hands fall in front of your thighs. Avoid pushing elbows back; that creates rigidity and an undesirable curve in your lower back.
- Thighs are forward and relaxed.
- Heels are a few inches from the wall.

Keep that posture and walk away from the wall. If you feel like a zombie, don't worry; you'll soon be comfortable, and appear taller—and, it will make you look great.

If you have difficulty following those suggestions, lie down on the floor and go through the checklist again. You might have to bend your knees a bit to do some of the things described. When you're finished, stand up and try to walk again.

Keeping that posture, check your appearance in a mirror. If you look like a weightlifter with a huge, blown-up chest, walking stiffly and swaying from side to side, you're not doing it correctly; go back to the wall and try the checklist again. When you're sure that everything is "in place," walk away from the wall and keep walking until your new posture alignment is comfortable and natural.

Breathing lessons

Your voice is a key factor in the impression you make on your audience. The knowledge that you have the power to physically control your voice can go a long way toward ensuring self-confidence, which, in turn, can help you conquer the fear of inadequacy that intensifies nervousness.

If you practice a few simple breathing exercises before your next training session or presentation, you can walk into the classroom and be free of the fear that your voice will come out too high or too squeaky, or that it will break as though it were changing.

Lie down on the floor, preferably a carpeted one. Make sure you're comfortable. Check your posture to see that it is aligned. Your back should be against the floor. If you can put your hand under your back, raise your knees slightly; that will prevent the hollow curve in the small of your back.

Many people trying breath-control exercises for the first time will lift their shoulders, raise their chests, and suck in their stomachs on the inhale—precisely the opposite of normal breathing. The only place where "heavy breathing" does any good is in silent films. Not only is that kind of breathing too shallow, but it doesn't allow you to control your breath. If you can't control your breath, you won't be able to give power to your voice, or to phrase your speech for meaning. So don't force anything.

Try these exercises several times, breathing deeply and naturally. You'll know when you're breathing correctly because you'll feel comfortable and will never run out of breath while making a crucial point.

- 1. Inhale, and notice how the abdominal muscles below your rib cage expand. Make sure it's your rib cage and stomach that are expanding, not your chest. When you breathe out, they collapse like a balloon, which expands when filled

with air and deflates when the air goes out. Exhale with a sigh. Repeat several times.

- 2. Try exhaling with a "m-m-m" sound.
- 3. Feel your back spread with each intake of breath.
- 4. Feel your body growing taller and expanding to the side. Watch your rib cage (diaphragm) and stomach rise, not your chest.
- 5. Silently count to two as you inhale; exhale to a count of 10. Repeat several times.
- 6. Inhale again on a silent count of two. This time, count out loud to 10 as you exhale. Each day try to count to a higher number, in order to increase your capacity and breath control.
- 7. Roll over on your side before standing up, so that you don't get dizzy. Then sit in a chair and repeat steps 1 to 6. Keep your back straight. Relieve any tension build-up by rolling your head from side to side or shrugging your shoulders. Try the exercises in as many positions on the chair as you can manage—such as kneeling, and bending over the seat, back, or arm of the chair. You'll be able to "feel" the breath spreading to many parts of the body and into your face and head.
- 8. Stand up, and then relax into the rag-doll position, hands dangling around your ankles. Inhale and exhale while saying, "One...one..." with full voice. Hold onto each "one" for five counts. Notice the resonance through your face and head. Your voice sounds lower, more relaxed, and more rich in tone. Continue the exercise, gradually raising your torso to a full standing position, then down again gradually to the rag-doll position. Don't forget to breathe between counts.
- 9. Do the above exercise exhaling the sounds, "ah," "aye," "ow," "oh," and "oo." Then add an *h* in front of each, but don't explode your breath on the *h*, leaving nothing for the other sounds.

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■ 10. Try the breathing exercises with any other exercises you want to do—arm swings, sit-ups, shoulder shrugs, leg swings. Then walk around saying some lines from your presentation. Be aware of where you breathe, and try to control your breath to phrase your meanings comfortably.

Take a deep breath

If you are still having difficulty, use the following exercises that deal with the breathing process.

The Vacuum. Exhale, blowing all the air out through your mouth. Pinch your nose with your thumb and forefinger to create a vacuum inside your air passages. Then attempt to breathe in against your thumb and forefinger. That will accentuate the vacuum. Hold for a count of five. Then let go and inhale. You will feel the air rush in, expanding your stomach and resulting in a deep, deep breath. Repeat several times.

The Whisper. Have you wondered how actors are able to whisper on stage and be heard throughout the audience? It's all a matter of breathing. To do a stage whisper, you don't use your voice (the vocal chords) at all; only your breath.

Without making a conscious effort to breathe, stand at one end of the room and whisper as though you were addressing a large audience: "Whisper, when you've discovered where it is!"

To project those unvoiced sounds so that they are clearly understood, you need to take enormous quantities of breath before almost every word—a lot of breath is needed for each syllable. So you're really doing this: (breathe) "Whisper" (breathe) "when" (breathe) "you've" (breathe) "discovered" (breathe) "where" (breathe) "it is!" Don't let the whisper die down at the end.

If you try it in front of a mirror, you can make sure your body appears relatively inactive when you take deep breaths—no heaving

chest, sucked-in stomach, or rigidity in the shoulders. Audiences don't need to see the mechanics, just the finished product.

Quick warmups

Whether doing physical or vocal exercises, always spend a few minutes warming up. You can do these for practice, but they are especially useful before presentations. If a private room is not available, go into a washroom and spend a few minutes warming up before your speech.

■ 1. Pull up into the aligned body posture. Then shake your hands and wrists, gently at first, then vigorously.

■ 2. Shrug your shoulders forward four to eight times, loosening them, then shrug them backward.

■ 3. Roll your head gently from side to side, and then all around, no straining or jerking. That loosens the neck, relieving tension.

■ 4. Slump over into the rag-doll position, knees slightly bent. Gradually straighten up, pulling up through the spine.

■ 5. Take a good, relaxing yawn, but stretch forward (both mouth and body), extending your arms out in front of your body at shoulder height. That should help relax your entire body, voice included.

Before the show

When Katharine Hepburn waited backstage to go on as the narrator of the Spencer Tracy Special, her producer asked, "Ms. Hepburn, is there anything I can get for you?"

"Yes," replied the Great One, "a passage to India."

So don't worry about feeling nervous before stepping into the spotlight—you're in first-class company.

On the day of your presentation, arrive early and check everything that can possibly go wrong. Then, head for the washroom. Take a big yawn and do your physical and vocal warmups. Then, with relaxed throat and body, go through the

other physical exercises. Most speakers cannot avoid the temptation of looking over their cards or outlines, though it shouldn't be necessary.

A woman who was the principal speaker at a civic function followed that advice. She headed for the washroom before her presentation. She checked her appearance—lipstick on straight, not on teeth; hair in place; bow on blouse anchored properly—and then whipped out her notes for last-minute practice. Within a few minutes a man appeared and asked what she was doing.

"Just going over my speech. I'm principal speaker for the Civic Association meeting this afternoon," she replied.

"Oh," he said. "Do you get very nervous when you have to speak?"

"Certainly not," she replied. "I'm a highly experienced speaker."

"I see," said the man. "Then, will you please tell me what you're doing in the men's room?"



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