

# Training 101

## C L A S S R O O M M A N A G E M E N T 1 0 1

A thorough understanding of the subject matter isn't enough. And a staff of crackerjack instructional designers can't make up for a stand-up trainer who isn't up to snuff. Running a classroom takes a special set of skills and experience.

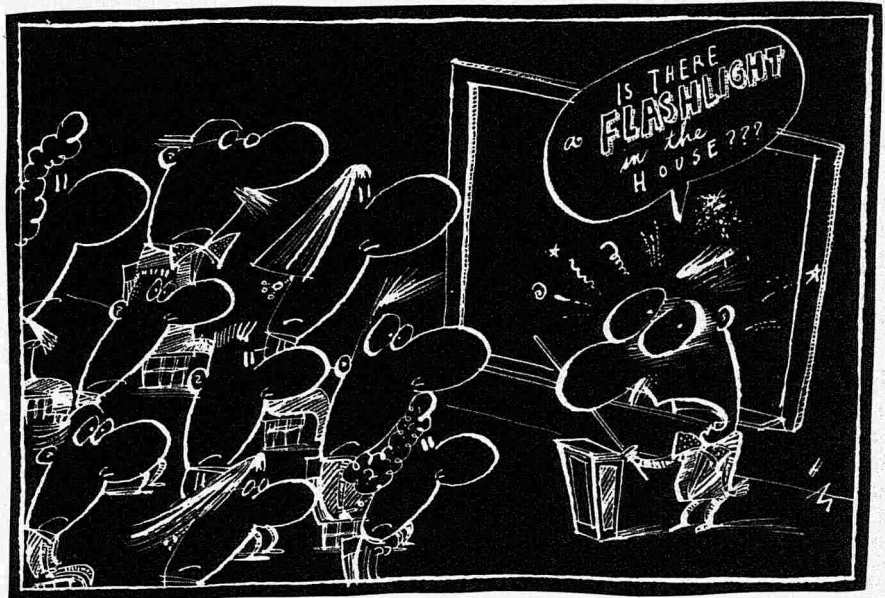
For instance, a clear outline of what you'll cover and when you'll get to it isn't much good for helping you cope with a heckler in the audience. And that written outline is even more useless if the electricity goes out and you can't read it. How does a trainer cope with the unexpected? In this month's first "Training 101" article, Stephen Boyd, a speech professor at Northern Kentucky University, describes some common training disasters and how to get through them.

In the second article, Wilbur Pike reminds trainers that presentation is at least as important as training content, and gives some tips for running a successful classroom.

Managing a classroom involves more than managing the training process, says Tom Schurr in the third article. Meeting facilities and classroom setups can make or break training sessions. Schurr discusses what to look for in a training facility and how to ensure that your dream program doesn't turn into a nightmare.

### When the Lights Go Out

Not long ago, I was speaking to about 300 people in a hotel conference room in total darkness. A storm had knocked out the electricity. I couldn't operate an overhead projector, use a public address system, or even see the audience! When preparing for the presentation, I certainly had not expected to be making it in the dark.



Hal Mayforth

Trainers and other public speakers have nightmares about facing such surprises while speaking. Sometimes, the unexpected is much less dramatic—just the thought of having a mental block or a giggling fit while onstage can paralyze a presenter.

How do you handle the unexpected? Above all, never panic or lose control. Act like you know what you are doing, even if you feel inadequate.

Here are some suggestions to give you specific techniques to consider when anything unexpected comes your way in a presentation. We'll look at ways to cope with mental blocks, uncontrollable fits of emotion, hecklers, audiences that can't stay awake, poor introductions, and, yes, electrical disasters.

**Mental blocks.** Have you ever had a mental block in the middle of an important presentation? What do you do when you suddenly realize that you've forgotten what comes next?

Whatever you do, don't panic! Instead, pause briefly. This will often give you the stability to reconstruct

*Where were you when the lights went out in the training room—covering in the corner, or completely in control? Here are some tips for managing classrooms through good times and bad ones.*

your thoughts and go on. If a short pause does not work, simply repeat what you were saying. We often repeat in a presentation for emphasis anyway, and repetition will sometimes get you over the mental block and on to your next point.

If that does not work, quickly admit to your audience that you have forgotten what you were going to say next. Smile when you tell them that. Most likely, everyone will breathe a sigh of relief because you have admitted what they already realize has happened.

Once you've admitted that you have forgotten, do whatever is necessary to get back on track. This may mean going to your briefcase or sorting through transparencies, or perhaps even asking your audience what your next thought is likely to be, based on what you've been saying.

Incidentally, you will have participants' attention when you admit that you've had a mental block. Audience members will empathize. They'll pull for you to find your place and go on.

**Uncontrollable weeping or laughing.** I heard of a recent wedding at which the bride was laughing so hard that she barely made it through her vows. When that happens in any public-speaking situation, the more you try to regain your composure, the more difficult it becomes to do so.

If you know ahead of time that emotional control will be difficult during a particular part of a program, write out what you are going to say. Then concentrate on reading it as you speak it. This will make you think logically instead of responding on an emotional level. You will be more likely to remain in control.

Another way of battling too much emotional involvement is to think of some inanimate object or scene, such as a familiar four-way stop intersection, the concrete foundation of your house, or the right rear tire of your car. Again, this can move you away from being overwhelmed emotionally and get you back on track with your material.

Practice your presentation in advance on another person. This helps you gain experience in handling delicate material without becoming emotionally entangled.

Another helpful trick is to find

someone in the audience who does not seem to be paying attention. Concentrate on that person as you deal with the emotional stress. Knowing someone is not paying attention will give you another goal, can shift gears for you emotionally, and may help you gain control.

**Hecklers.** Heckling is any form of disruption or interruption of your speech. It could be two audience members carrying on their own conversation during your presentation, or a participant who disagrees publicly with your position.

If at all possible, ignore a heckler. The distraction may be only momentary. If you react too quickly, you run the risk of alienating other participants. Also, peer pressure often takes care of the heckling, if you ignore it. People near the heckler may "shush" him or her.

If that doesn't work, appeal to the heckler's sense of fair play. Say, "I would appreciate it if you would let me finish my point. Then I'll let you have two minutes to refute my position. That way, I can be heard without any more interruption, and you will also have your turn." Be sure to set a time limit on the response if you choose this route.

If all else fails, and you are losing control, simply cut your presentation short. Whatever you do, don't show anger or make the heckler look stupid. If you do, you may win the argument—but you will lose the other participants because they will sympathize with the underdog.

**Audiences that fall asleep.** Participants actually doze off as you are making a critical point. People begin shuffling their feet and looking at their watches as you speak. What can you do to salvage the presentation?

First, change the pace. If you are speaking loudly, speak more softly. If you are behind the lectern, move into your audience. If you are speaking from the front of the room, move to the back of the room to make a point. Use a visual aid. Any change of pace can wake people up.

In my speeches, I frequently use an overhead projector. I always try to have a couple of relevant cartoons I can throw on the screen to change the pace and bring participants back to me if they drift.

Another way to recover a "lost audience" is to take your material in a different direction. Break up the formal outline with a relevant story. Stop the presentation and initiate a question-and-answer period. Even ask yourself a question, if audience members do not respond. Ask the audience to write down the information, or invite people to volunteer something they have learned so far.

Another way to wake up the audience is with mini-break. Have everyone stand and stretch or even pat themselves on the back.

**Poor introductions.** The introducer mispronounces your name, gives inaccurate information, or tries to be a comedian—telling old or tasteless jokes instead of giving you an introduction that develops your credibility and makes the audience want to listen. How do you react?

Whatever you do, do not make fun of the person who has done a poor job.

A better choice is to ignore the introduction and move right into your material. A "bombed" introduction can leave an audience feeling awkward; quickly moving to the content of the presentation can help dispel the awkwardness. And any reference to the problem can prolong the audience's bad impression.

Another way of dealing with an introduction that does not do what it is supposed to do is to introduce yourself as a part of the presentation. Include information about your life in the content of your presentation: "In my 25 years of working with trainees I have found that..." or, "In the two books I have written about..." Such a statement adds to your credibility and helps introduce your material.

**Power failures.** So what did I do when the lights went out in the session described above? I moved closer to the audience so that they could hear me more easily—and so that I could see them better. I mentally reorganized my material in order to present the funniest and most stimulating stories and examples first. I moved around the room often to keep the audience's attention; laughter and other overt responses helped me to know that the audience was with me.



After the first break, the lights came back on. I was able to return to the material I had bypassed.

See? With a little planning, even the unexpected can be handled in a prepared fashion.

— **Stephen D. Boyd**

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## How They Learn What They Learn

**T**oo many trainers expect the training content to carry their programs. That may be because some trainers are more impressed with the material than the participants will be. But how a trainer presents the material is at least as important as the material itself.

How does a savvy facilitator build rapport, set the learning atmosphere, and focus attention in the training room? Choosing an approach to achieve those goals is partly a matter of personal style. But several guidelines can help trainers assess and alter their styles until they hit on what works for them. The following ideas, techniques, and tricks of the trade offer a way to *think* more than a way to *be*.

**Be clear about process objectives.** Almost any professional trainer will have a clear picture of the *content* objectives for the program he or she is about to present. Far fewer trainers have absolutely clear *process* objectives—*how* the content objectives will be achieved.

For instance, do we want trainees to “get it” by listening to us, by listening to each other, by using a workbook, by watching a video, or by working at a keyboard?

Once we’re crystal-clear about our process objectives, we can better plan our moves toward achieving them.

**Make process objectives consistent with content objectives.** Consistency between what you want trainees to get and how you want them to get it is a very powerful influence on trainees’ retention of training content. When a program is over, participants should be able to look back at the activities that took place and instantly recall their content. If that happens, the trainer has doubled the strength

of the message and the chances that trainees will remember it.

For example, if the training content deals with team building skills, the trainer should consider using small-group activities and other assignments that allow team members to learn from the process. In short, the process and the content are the same.

In a basic course on interpersonal communications, that kind of a teamwork approach may be inappropriate. Having participants stay in the same groups throughout the workshop can be less effective than assigning new one-on-one partners for each new activity. When you rotate the pairings throughout a one- or two-day workshop, each participant has the opportunity to practice skills with many different partners. That provides trainees with far more input about their skills.

**Learn as much as you can about your effect on trainees.** We all love to read “happy-sheet” evaluations at the end of our programs, but they seldom tell us how we achieved the reactions.

Trainers need to know hundreds of bits of information about the ways trainees respond to them. A trainer who understands the ways in which he or she is having an effect may be able to make better use of those areas in order to enhance learning.

Various clues can help you discern trainee reactions. Do participants’ eyes follow you everywhere? If they do, then you may be able to pull quieter audience members into a discussion simply by standing or sitting behind them so that all other eyes will see them first. Do trainees direct all their remarks to you because you’re standing in front? You may encourage group discussion simply by sitting down in an empty seat, among the trainees.

Sitting with trainees can also enhance your transition from one subject or activity to another, especially if the new activity is one that you must be clearly in charge of. The transition can be much easier and more evident if you start your new introduction from your participant’s seat and move, while talking, to the front of the room. Then write on a flipchart any instructions you

have given out loud. That places you firmly back “in charge.” The transition has been achieved primarily through your own understanding of your effect on the group.

**Take control of the room setup.** Trainers often have some control over the physical setups of their training rooms. Most trainers understand how the configuration of chairs and desks can enhance the interaction requirements of a program. But you can also enhance a program by concentrating on what your space looks like.

A trainer who is offering high volumes of highly technical information may want to place all the piles of data, handouts, and printouts on a table in the center of the room. The acquisition and flow of external information is the center of the program. Placing the physical information vehicles in the center of the room gives participants a visual reminder of why they are present.

Conversely, when the learning objective is individual and group brainstorming, it makes sense to move all such visual distractions out of the participants’ sight.

**Listen for facilitation cues.** In their icebreakers, many trainers use warm-up activities that include questions that encourage participants to share successful training experiences. Such questions give trainers the chance to really listen to the ways in which the group defines success.

Learners tell the trainer what works for them. Then the trainer may be able to add those ideas subtly to his or her approach. Using information gleaned from learners helps a trainer increase participant comfort early in the process.

**Don’t be afraid to entertain.** I recently spoke to a group of credit-union CEOs about hiring good people. It was the second of two solid days of heavy financial and marketing speakers; a reception luncheon cruise was to follow immediately after my speech. In other words, the participants were ready to party. So I started their party a little ahead of time.

I extracted from my objectives just three simple guidelines. I illustrated them with partly true and partly outrageous stories of successful and unsuccessful hiring practices. I had

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## Training 101

no control over the theater-style seating, but we had a lot of fun climbing over chairs and each other in order to break into groups of 10. I encouraged participants in the brainstorming session to come up with at least two really off-the-wall suggestions.

They had a ball. Post-session feedback showed that the session had met the training objectives. Participants said they had never had so much fun on such a relatively mundane topic, and that they got great new ideas as well as renewed motivation to hire effectively. The group has invited me to propose more "heavy" topics with a light approach for its next conference.

Some people are afraid to use humor in training, and it's true that humor must be used carefully. But generally, when a trainer thinks and feels like a professional and is absolutely grounded in his or her topic, humor poses little risk as a conveyance medium. And humor and entertainment can help ensure a multisensory experience, which can contribute to long-term retention.

Current research about trends in adult learning are sending us back to Marshall McLuhan's insight, "The medium is the message" (from his 1964 book, *Understanding Media*). Trainers who embrace that concept have the highest chances for success.

— **Wilbur L. Pike**

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## Training Nightmares and How To Avoid Them

Every training manager has his or her favorite nightmare story about problems with training facilities. Can such disasters be avoided? Let's look at nine of the worst training nightmares, and explore ways in which these kinds of jittery moments could have been avoided.

**What's going on next door?** Edna Marie Cole, a human resource consultant with 23 years of experience, remembers the time that she led a training session in a hotel, in the room next to the kitchen.

On the same day, the catering department was preparing a large



wedding luncheon. Cole and her trainees were constantly irritated and interrupted by the sounds of pots and pans banging, orders being shouted to kitchen help, and the general din of a kitchen in full swing.

A training program requires a particularly quiet and comfortable environment. Without it, participants may have trouble meeting their learning goals. The facilitator should ask a hotel to reserve a meeting room away from built-in distractions such as a busy lobby area, entryway, restaurant, or pool.

**So near and yet so far.** One training session for a manufacturing firm involved multiple workstations in different rooms of a hotel, lunch and dinner in the main hotel restaurant, and a cocktail get-together afterward. Unfortunately, the sites were located at the four corners of the resort. Participants were galloping from point to point until it got to be a "running" joke.

If your program involves complex scheduling, insist that the hotel concentrate the different meeting sites in one central area. It's also a good idea to obtain a layout of the room locations to get an idea of the time it takes to walk between them.

**Setup breakdown.** A computer hardware firm had modified tables to suit its special needs. Then, without the firm's knowledge, the meeting was switched to another room. Unfortunately, only a few of the special tables fit into the smaller space. Throughout the day, participants with places to sit had to play musical chairs to give the unfortunate standees a break.

A responsible meeting planner always checks the night before to make sure that the room is being arranged as specified.

**You can't do it alone.** One trainer in the entertainment industry volunteered to put on a large program by himself, but couldn't delegate any of the work because he didn't have adequate support staff. He got in over his head by trying to handle everything solo—from decor and audiovisual setup, to meeting and greeting, to facilitating some of the sessions. Needless to say, there wasn't enough of him to go around;

no aspect of the event was a complete success.

Are you short on support staff? You may be able to get suppliers to act as part of your team and go the extra mile for you. See if you can include the services of hotel or meeting facility personnel in the contract for the space. That can include a hotel conference services director as well as "legwork" people.

**Roll with the punches.** Mason Cartmell, manager of management training and development for California Casualty Management Company, recalls a training program that was arranged at a hotel the firm had never used before.

The executive vice-president of the company was to make a special appearance at an evening cocktail party after the training session. The group walked over to the party room, and Cartmell flung open the door. He expected to see buffets of delicacies, a hosted bar, and neatly uniformed caterers, ready to serve. Instead, he saw a musty room with chairs stacked against the wall.

The key to preventing impersonal, uncaring service is to build a solid, long-term relationship with a hotel that needs and appreciates your business.

**If it can go wrong, it will go wrong.** At one hotel, a training group had the misfortune to be scheduled on the same day as the revamping of the climate-control system. As the temperature swung widely from subtropical to arctic, participants were constantly discarding jackets and then putting them back on.

Is there a possibility that your training session will take place at the same time as construction work, interior painting, recarpeting, or other renovation work? If so, your hotel should notify you well in advance so that alternate arrangements can be made if necessary. But it couldn't hurt to ask.

**Make a list and check it twice.** At one firm, a new director with a sales background took over the helm and organized a highly motivational training session for employees. Banners were printed with the new company slogan, large graphs and charts were designed to show projected growth, and new sales techniques were pic-

torially presented on posters.

When the prep team arrived in the morning, it learned that it was not allowed to attach materials to the walls or hang items from the ceilings.

A careful facilitator or session planner finds out about such restrictions ahead of time, and works with the contact at the meeting facility to ensure that the session is a success.

**Communication is key.** A group of new employees from a health-food firm arrived at a hotel for an orientation. The firm had instructed the hotel's sales manager to provide a buffet of oat bran muffins, fresh fruit, fresh-squeezed juices, nonfat milk, and herbal tea. Instead, the group found sweet pastries, industrial-strength coffee, and bagels with cream cheese.

To avoid such miscommunications about any special requirements, the session planner should speak personally to the managers of the hotel's sales, catering, reservations, and rooms divisions.

**Too much of a good thing.** A training manager for an up-and-coming apparel company was pleased that she was finally given the budget to take her group to a deluxe, full-service resort. In the past, she had held her sessions at smaller, less luxurious sites.

But she found that the new site didn't encourage the bonding and camaraderie that had been so important to the success of past sessions. Instead, participants spent their free time getting massages, playing golf, and trying out the various restaurants.

For some training purposes, the intimate ambience of a facility with fewer than 300 rooms is preferable to the distracting environment of a 1,000-room convention hotel. If team spirit and close interaction are essential to the goals of your program, make sure that the site's inherent structure and layout is conducive to achieving those goals.

— Tom Schurr

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