

Winning Trainer

Series of Winning Articles for Trainers

Presentation Skills for Trainers

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Presentation Skills for Trainers

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Like it or not, today's trainers are also performers. It's becoming increasingly more difficult to gain and maintain program participants' attention and interest. Today's corporate classroom audiences expect and demand to be entertained as well as trained. They want the learning experience to be both meaningful and enjoyable. Although challenging, meeting these needs and expectations is not difficult if you incorporate interactive techniques in your training design.

Get Them Active From the Start

Participant involvement is critical to the success of your training program. "People learn by doing, not by being told", a basic principle of adult learning, should be your guide in designing any training program, from the highly technical to the so-called "soft skills" addressed in human resource development programs.

From the very beginning, participants need to be engaged. You can create immediate involvement with a variety of fun, yet content-related activities and techniques. Opening activities can accomplish several goals: (1) involving the participants immediately in the learning experience; (2) creating a risk-free learning environment; (3) communicating personal responsibility for learning; (4) introducing the content; (5) building group cohesiveness; and (6) assessing participant needs and expectations.

Be sure to choose an opening activity that will accomplish several goals or objectives. For example, one very successful technique is called, "What Do You Want to Know?" You, the trainer, post flip chart pages on the wall, each with a heading that corresponds to the major topics of the training program. Then give a packet of Post-it® Notes to each participant and ask the participants to write down any

questions they have about any of the topics. They may fill as many notes as they want, but they may put only one question per note. The participants then get up and place their questions under the appropriate headings. You can then categorize the questions and compare them to the learning objectives of the session. This method gives participants an opportunity to express their expectations anonymously. They are also immediately engaged in the process, thinking about the content, and beginning to take ownership for their learning. The only goal this activity does not meet is building group cohesiveness.

Involving Your Audience

Group involvement, a critical component of an effective training session, is easy if you follow the principles and practices of cooperative or peer learning. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that participants work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. For our purpose, a small group can be as few as two people or as many as eight. As trainers, we need to keep two very important principles in mind: (1) learning by nature is an active endeavor, and (2) different people learn in different ways. With those principles in mind, trainers need to use a variety of methods that will ensure a high level of participation and a moderate level of content.

The trainer needs to create many opportunities for the participants to interact with each other. Often this may involve asking people to work in pairs to come up with a joint answer to a question posed by the trainer, prepare a list of guidelines related to the topic, or discuss individual responses. Pairs ensure 100% participant involvement in a low-risk environment.

The use of small groups is a very effective way to get people involved. Use small groups to generate ideas, discuss concepts, solve problems, or work on case studies. Small groups provide more opportunities for people to contribute and participate. Often those who are reluctant to speak up in a large group situation seem to "come alive" when placed in a small group setting.

Interacting With the Audience

Many trainers use role playing as a skill-building technique in their training programs. More often than not, this technique does not achieve the desired results because of participant resistance. One very effective, non-threatening way of using role play is to conduct a demonstration role play. You would have prepared a scripted role play depicting either the right way or wrong way of using a particular skill, technique, or process. Early in the session, select two “actors” from the group and give them the script so they will have an opportunity to familiarize themselves with their parts prior to the demonstration. At the appropriate point in the program, ask the “players” to come forward and simply read their scripts while the rest of the group observes the interaction for various do’s and don’ts that illustrate the learning points.

Another non-threatening role play technique involves the trainer as one of the role players. Ask for a volunteer to come up front and assume the role of the other person. For example, in a “Customer Service” session, you want to demonstrate how to deal with an irate customer. You assume the role of the customer service representative and ask for a volunteer to play the irate customer who is returning a piece of merchandise for a full refund. The “employee” (played by the trainer) is not permitted to give a refund, only store credit. As the role play begins, the “customer” demands a refund. At this point, you stop the action and turn to the participants for coaching. When the action resumes, you as the employee follow the group’s suggestions in responding to the customer. This stop-action technique is used several times throughout the role play.

Trainers who want to promote interaction will often use open-ended questions to encourage participation. Although this technique is useful, its biggest flaw is that generally a handful of people respond. Many trainers complain that the same people are answering all the questions or offering input. There are several techniques that will guarantee 100% audience response. One method is to use response cards. Hand each participant cards to use in responding to multiple choice (A,B,C,D) or true-false (T,F) questions. Develop 3 or 4 statements or questions to which participants will respond with their cards. As you read (or show) each item, participants will respond by holding up the card of their choice.

Another way to get every person to respond is to use an active response system. Choose 4 or 5 questions or statements designed to get participants to express their opinions about a certain topic. For example, to introduce the topic of “Managing Conflict” you might choose the following statements:

- Conflict is inevitable.
- Conflict increases during times of change.
- Conflict can lead to either creative or dysfunctional results.
- Conflict should be encouraged.

You would ask participants to stand. As you display the first statement, ask participants to remain standing if they agree with the statement and sit down if they disagree. Then ask a few people to explain why they agreed or disagreed before moving to the next statement. An alternative approach would be to ask participants to hold up cards with an “A” for agree and “D” for disagree.

Using Theatrical Techniques

It’s show time! Each training session should be a carefully crafted and choreographed production enhanced and enlivened by the use of theatrical techniques including props, costumes, and staging techniques. The idea is to make the training experience memorable.

A great way to start is to have a theme. For example, for a team building session, you might choose a sports theme. Training materials would include sports graphics such as pictures of people playing sports and various sports equipment. To reinforce your message of the importance of creating a team environment, bring props to the session. Use a referee’s whistle to bring the group back together at the end of a group activity. Use ball caps to indicate team leaders. When you break into subgroup activities, you could group people by different sports. For example, one group might be baseballs; another basketballs; and others could be footballs, soccer balls, tennis racquets, hockey sticks, etc. Pictures of these various pieces of sports equipment would indicate the location of each subgroup in the room or break-out rooms. Or if you choose to use one sport as a central theme- let’s say football - then

each subgroup would be assigned the name of a professional football team. You could play recorded team “fight songs” to create the mood as participants enter the room or during breaks. To encourage participation, reward participants with “prizes” of sports paraphernalia such as mini sports balls, key chains, etc. You could also use sports items attached to cards listing key learning points as giveaways. These little reminders are powerful reinforcement tools. If you’re really adventurous, you might even come to the session dressed as a referee, a football player, or a cheerleader. One thing’s for sure - you’ll get their attention!

If your comfort zone calls for the less dramatic, you can still use props as metaphors to make your point and reinforce the learning. For example, in a session on change, you might show a “Slinky” to illustrate the need for flexibility. The “Magic Eye” posters are a great way to show how we need to look beyond the obvious and see things differently. A compass can be used in a session on goal setting to represent the need for direction. The possibilities are endless, and you are bound only by your imagination.

Creating Word Pictures

Powerful presentation skills include the ability to create mental images, whether you’re on the stage or in the classroom. Mental imagery or visualization can be very effective in helping participants create a picture in their minds and overcome obstacles. For example, in a “Presentation Skills” class, the trainer might use visualization to help participants overcome stage fright. You would start by playing relaxation music to create the mood. You would then ask participants to close their eyes, relax, and begin breathing deeply. Next ask them to picture a favorite place where they feel safe, relaxed, and comfortable. Give them a few minutes to create that picture in their minds. Next, ask them to picture themselves in front of an audience and then ask them the following questions:

- What are you wearing?
- What time of day is it?
- What does the room look like?
- What kind of lighting do you have?
- How many people are there?
- What are you talking about?

Next ask them to visualize themselves at the end of their presentation. They have just delivered a flawless speech. The audience is smiling, standing, and clapping with enthusiasm. Give the participants a little time to “savor the moment.” After they have had an opportunity to “experience” their taste of success, ask them to open their eyes and discuss with the person next to them how they felt. Most people will respond that they felt very good and enjoyed the feeling of success. The message here, of course, is for them to use this technique to help overcome stage fright every time they are asked to make a presentation or give a speech.

Another powerful technique trainers can use to reinforce their learning points is to tell stories - stories from their own experience. Stories help the trainer relate to the group, and they help the participants identify with the trainer. Not only does storytelling help create a high trust level between trainer and participants, stories help the message come alive. For example, in a “Presentation Skills” class, I have shared my story about going blank and completely forgetting my speech during a speech contest in high school. I tell the story to illustrate the danger of memorizing and over preparing. The story also illustrates the point that although it was an embarrassing and traumatic experience, I didn’t let it stop me. Here I am many years later - a professional speaker!

Bringing It to a Close

Endings are just as important as the rest of the training program. Remember: it’s not what you give them, but what they take away that counts. There are many activities you can use to make your training unforgettable. Remember the “What Do You Want to Know” activity where participants wrote their questions and expectations on Post-it Notes? To bring your training session full circle, ask the participants to get up and reclaim or take off their notes if their question or expectation was addressed. If you’ve done your job, then the flip chart pages on the wall will be empty. Not only does this activity bring closure to the session, it reinforces the learning. By reclaiming their questions, the participants have taken ownership and are acknowledging that their needs have been met.

Another effective closing technique is the human continuum. At the end of a training session, post two signs, one at each end of a long wall. For example, one sign might read "Competent" and the other, "Clueless". Ask the participants to envision the wall as a continuum. Ask them to think about where they were in terms of their knowledge of the subject and/or skill level at the beginning of the session. Then ask them to stand up and place themselves where they think they were on the continuum. Then ask a few participants to share why they placed themselves where they did. Next ask them to think about where they are on the continuum at the end of the program and place themselves accordingly. Once again, ask participants to share the reasons for their placement. Most people will have moved from the "Clueless" end to the "Competent". Sometimes, however, the reverse happens. Those who come to the session thinking they "know it all" will often discover that they didn't know as much as they thought they did. Consequently, they will indicate a movement in the opposite direction. In either case, this activity is a powerful way to help participants assess how much they perceive they have learned.

Like any other presentation, a successful training session is the result of careful planning, preparation, and practice. Effective trainers use a skillful blend of content and participant interaction to create a program that not only involves and informs but influences others to assimilate new information, modify attitudes, and change behaviors in both their professional and personal lives.

About the Author

Karen Lawson, PhD, CSP, is an international consultant, executive coach, speaker, and author. She has built a successful organization and management development consulting firm working with Fortune 500 companies as well as small businesses. Dr. Lawson specializes in cultivating outstanding leaders who enable their organizations to outperform the competition. For a complete list of her products and services, contact Lawson Consulting Group, Inc. at 215-368-9465 or at www.LawsonCG.com.

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