

**The Chartered Management Institute's Short Course Programme
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The trainer and the learning group – getting relationships right

Running a training session is a multi-faceted skill. Success requires not only subject knowledge and presentation skills but also the ability to manage well the relationship with the learning group. Philip Moon examines some of the factors that affect this relationship and offers some practical tips to the 'stand-up' trainer.

The physical environment

'Cram people into a cage like rats, and they'll behave like rats.' Cram course participants into a small and tacky room and you create a training environment in which hostility may flourish and certainly relationships will be damaged. All trainers will have their horror stories about course venues. My personal one is of the course I was asked to conduct in a basement room, which was also the repository for parked bicycles, broken office chairs and piles of old magazines. Although things are not always so obviously dreadful, getting the physical environment right is a pre-requisite for good group relationships.

Try to minimise the amount of clutter in the room and the amount of clutter you generate. Allow adequate space for participants to get up and move around. Ensure clear lines of vision so that televisions, OHP screens and flip charts can be seen by everybody without participants having to duck, weave or squint.

This last point may be obvious and even old hat as a piece of instructional technique, but how often do hotels which purport to be in the course venue business offer long narrow rooms with low ceilings with all that implies for the optimal arrangement of audio-visual equipment? How often is a low stand and high tilting screen provided for the overhead projector? How often is a high stand provided for a television set? The answer is alas that optimal conditions are all too rare: trainers need to take greater care in selecting venues. Consider the implications of

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seating arrangements. U-shape seating is commonly preferred as it allows for maximum participation with everyone sat in the front row. However, at least one commercial training organisation consciously chooses a schoolroom style layout not only to enable larger groups to be accommodated but also to protect its presenters from too much interaction.

Try to reduce your physical and thus your psychological distance from the group. Lay the room out so that you can get in amongst the group and don't withdraw to the defensive security of sitting behind a head-table or speaker's desk. Indeed if you can, get rid of the head-table and sit on the inside of the U.

Rapport and credibility

Working with a particular group for the first time, success in speedily establishing rapport and credibility is essential.

Greet people individually as they arrive for the course, by shaking their hand and by using their name. Refer to shared experiences and relationships when introducing the course -for instance by subtle comments to indicate that you already enjoy a personable relationship with the manager responsible for organising the event. You can even establish rapport by revealing your own frailties - a light-hearted comment perhaps on how bad you are at spelling when using the flip chart. And, of course, you can always start with a joke!

Credibility depends upon you establishing your credentials in respect of your knowledge of the subject and your appreciation of the course participants' situation. You must also establish the practicality of the approach you will be adopting: managers, supervisors and other working folk have little respect for theoretical treatises which are of seemingly little relevance to their daily lives.

Participation

Get course participants doing something early. Long periods of listening lead to restlessness and even hostility. Most people like the sound of their own voice best - this is both a warning not to talk too much and an encouragement to get the group talking and contributing as soon as possible.

Personal introductions give everyone a chance to talk, but it is perhaps a mistake to jump straight into the round-the-table intro's before people have had a chance to settle in and, indeed, before you've had the chance to impose some sort of shape on the course and stamp your control on it.

My own preference is to start by getting participants to complete their name cards - this not only gives them something active to do, it also ensures that I can refer to them by name and bring each individual into the conversation. My next stage is to outline the course objectives, structure, times and other arrangements - the 'why' and 'what' and 'when' - before returning to personal introductions - the 'who'.

Use open questions to develop discussion, but be wary that you don't open the conversation up too early and lose control. In the very early stages closed questions can be safer and can be used to gain agreement or acquiescence. 'Is that Okay.... Paul?' 'Are there any questions?' 'Is everybody happy?' Most individuals and most groups will nod and agree; in which case they've bought into your way of doing things and your way of handling the subject.

Question handling

Question handling is an essential part of participative training but can be tricky. You need to be responsive, respectful and assertive. Responsive in the sense that if someone has raised a question or point, they deserve to have it acknowledged and explored. Respectful in those viewpoints different from your own should be respected - even if a point is naive, never in any way express or surreptitiously communicate such an interpretation to the group. Above all be assertive. While acknowledging the validity of other view-points don't turn into a chameleon changing your ideas around to fit in with those of the group. Neither should you demand absolute compliance to your point of view. It is quite acceptable to leave.

All questions need to be fielded skillfully. Buy yourself time to compose a considered answer. This can be done by pausing (while nodding and showing interest), by rephrasing the question or by asking for it to be repeated. In dealing with groups one of the most useful techniques available is to pass the question back to the group. 'That's an important issue that we should take a closer look at. John, what do you think?'

With a persistent and awkward questioner, this tactic may be varied passing the question back to the questioner for his/her answer and then passing it on to other members of the group for their views. Using group pressures to control individuals helps avoid trainer/participant confrontations.

Body language

At a sub-conscious level, your body language and speech patterns will communicate important messages to the group that will affect the relationship. Even as an experienced trainer, I have, on some occasions, faced groups where some individuals have been sitting with their arms

folded, their faces glum and their gestures tight - their body language communicating to me some unhappiness with what I was saying. Body language is catching. Because participants are unhappy the danger is that I feel unhappy and adopt defensive negative body language myself, folding my arms tight and perhaps withdrawing behind the head table. Such a response can lead to a cycle of tension and conflict. The trick is, of course, to adopt countervailing body language using open gestures and minimising the physical distance from the group. It's amazing how often such a tactic has reduced tensions and repaired relationships.

Groups are made up of individuals who, in group situations, may act very differently from their normal ways. People who are normally reasonable and mild-mannered may become argumentative and opinionated, the training session providing a stage upon which they can perform. Other, usually quite forthcoming, individuals may clam up and not wish to say anything in front of their peers.

Your role is to ensure that everyone participates, no one dominates and that you stay in control to facilitate an orderly learning process.

The Hogger

This is the individual who likes the sound of their own voice and wants to hog the conversation. Bring the group in to counteract this person and to avoid them dominating. This can be done almost explicitly 'Okay, that's an interesting point. Let's hear what other people have got to say.... Jane.

The Know-it-all

The Know-it-all is closely related to the Hogger and again the basic tactic is to bring other members of the group into the discussion. A really persistent Know-it-all should be given a certain amount of leeway to pursue their point. After all they're going to try to express their view even if you do not provide the opportunity. Indeed upon occasions you might even say 'Is there anything you'd like to add?'

However don't let the conversation go on too long. When you come to a break, take up the reins of control and say 'Right, I think we want to move on to another subject'. Don't feel you have to come up with a counter argument. You don't always have to have the last word.

The Bully

The Bully squashes other points of view. Left uncontrolled, bullies may lead some people to withdraw into their shells; others may be provoked into open hostility. The key here is to avoid

meeting hostility with hostility and to use group pressures instead. Canvas group support for the views the bully has attacked. Protect the weak.

The Timorous Beastie

This is the shy retiring type who obviously needs to be brought into the discussion. Monitor which of the group isn't actually making much of a contribution to discussion so that you can make the effort to address questions to them. Support for their viewpoint will encourage them to participate further. Attacking that viewpoint will discourage them.

A matter of attitude

At the end of the day, of course, trainer-group relationships are a matter of trainer attitude. Always remember that each member of the group is equally important and that you have a direct and professional responsibility to each of them to make the learning experience you're offering as worthwhile as possible.