



**The Chartered Management Institute's Short Course Programme
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Training room management - getting it right

In an earlier article I wrote about managing the learning group. There I suggested that an important part of handling the group dynamics was to ensure that the training room was laid out in a way which was conducive to good training and constructive interaction between learners and trainer. 'If you cram people in to room like rats' I wrote, 'don't be surprised if they behave like rats'. I've subsequently been told that this was rather insulting to rats!

Over the last ten years I've run many courses in many venues - a lot in hotels, a good number in company boardrooms and meeting rooms, and some in dedicated training facilities. I would be kind if I said the quality of these venues had been variable. Few have been ideal; far too many have been poor; most could have been improved by a little more attention or foresight.

This article is a cri de coeur aimed at those responsible for providing and managing training facilities. The quality of training is inexorably tied up with the quality of venue.

A starting point must be space. Space allows flexibility and comfort. If you don't have enough space on-site for a decent training room, then be prepared to hire off-site facilities. (There's always an advantage anyway in getting people away from the office for training purposes.) If for budgetary reasons that's not possible, then recognise you may have to accept smaller leaning groups to fit within the space available. This may mean repeating a course to cover the targeted number of participants. If a potential client asks me how many people I can take on a course, I always indicate that that one of the constraints will be the facilities they intend to use.

Space remains an issue even if you do hire off-site facilities. Be wary of the hotelier who says 'this room will take 15 people'. Will it? Perhaps it might for a business meeting or a lunch lasting two to three hours, but training is different. Is there sufficient space for trainer and equipment? Will participants be so closely packed that they will have inadequate space for papers and personal comfort? Does fitting in 15 course members mean people sitting on rather flimsy

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narrow chairs, some having to mould themselves around awkward table legs and others squeezed into obscured corner positions?

Notwithstanding my comments about the almost ubiquitous narrow and uncomfortable chair, space can also be consumed by furniture which is too large and inflexible. Paradoxically this can mean that while there's not enough space to fit more people, participants can be so spread out that intimacy and informality of communication is lost.

Space isn't simply a matter of square meters. The shape of the room is vital. Too many hotel meeting rooms and too many boardrooms are long and narrow. Width is important. It allows for seats to be arranged in a broad U-shape. This means that the trainer can use the inside of the U, reducing the physical space between him/herself and course participants. It also means that more of the group sits facing the front rather than facing each other. Another advantage of the wide room is that it provides what I call a broad 'presentation front'- accommodating if necessary, a flipchart easel, a white board and a projector screen.

Other space issues involve the availability of breakout areas for small discussion groups or exercises. Ideally these should be adjacent. A large enough room can allow you to set up discussion groups in the corners, so long as groups are not going to be disturbing each other.

Space provides flexibility. It allows you to use a variety of seating arrangements - theatre or schoolroom styles if those are preferred for large groups, broad U-shape as referred to above, boardroom if required, and even cabaret style for some events.

Equipment is, of course, another important issue. Again flexibility should be the watchword. Not all trainers want to do things the same way and fixed equipment narrows their options. Personally I like the 'teaching wall' system with screens and flipcharts attached to a rail, but I also like the flexibility of having available a stand-alone easel and screen.

This brings me to the subject of data projectors which have largely superseded one of my former bêtes noires - the overhead. While this represents an improvement, there remain problems with choosing the right projector and ensuring optimal projection.

For training purposes, projectors should be selected to have a short throw - that is to say to produce a large image even if the projector is only a meter or so from the screen. They need a high luminosity as they need to be used 'lights up' and they also need to be selected for quietness - background noise from the fan can get very irksome. I also like to have a projector with

a remote control which includes a 'blinking button'. This allows the presenter to blank the projection while still being able to see what's on his/her monitor.

Optimal projection involves correcting the keystone effects created by projecting upwards. Fortunately this is relatively easy with modern data projectors as long as the user or the person setting up the equipment knows how. Keystone adjustment will be found on the controls and, if not, in the menu. If the projector has been chosen well it will also be on the remote.

Watch out for poor colour reproduction. This is often caused by a damaged VGA cable. Alternatively you may need to adjust colour, brightness and contrast control. Poor VGA connections can also cause fuzzy images. This is the case when the VGA cable is too long as may occur with ceiling mounted projectors. A heavier duty cable or some kind of boosting system is needed to overcome this problem.

If the trainer intends to show videos, don't rely on the speakers mounted in the projector – they're usually too small to offer an acceptable amplification. Ensure therefore that you have an appropriate speaker system set up.

So far we've looked at space, shape, layout and equipment requirements and touched in passing on furnishing. Seating and tables require some further discussion and emphasis. 'Numb bum syndrome' is damaging to a good course and fatal to a poor one. Participants may have to sit still for a long time. Good chairs, probably with arms, are important. Tables without legs (pedestal style) also aid comfort and it's worth looking at trapezoid-shaped tables which can, if required, be used to build a hexagon seating arrangement. Stacking and storage is another issue to consider. Chairs which can go one on top of the other and tables that fold have advantages. Ideally furniture not being used should be stored out of sight. The training room should be kept as tidy and uncluttered as possible.

Temperature control is another factor which will affect comfort and concentration. A system which is easy to adjust, subtle and responsive is important. Noisy fans are to be avoided – their constant drone tends to sap everyone's energy and attention. You also need to think about blinds.

Other issues include the location of power points, control over lighting (please can we be able to switch off the light which shines onto the projector screen) – the position of doors, the proximity of toilets and catering facilities.

Some of these things appear to be small details, but such small things count. By getting the environment right we should hopefully make the training experience valuable and enjoyable for both learners and trainer alike.

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