

Achieving effective training – the trainers’ Holy Grail

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How often have colleagues come to you after a training course and said ‘what a waste of time’ or ‘that was a nice break away’? More to the point, how often have you uttered those same words, or statements of an equally derogative nature about a training course?

In 2007 UK industry alone spent £38.5 billion on staff training, according to the National Employer skills survey, but how much of that training was effectively delivered and carried over into the workplace?

Ensuring that a training session is effective is the Holy Grail for training deliverers.

I personally don’t like to use the word ‘trainer’ and don’t see myself as such. In my opinion, a ‘trainer’ is someone who utilises the ‘information dump’ method of training, rattling off information verbatim from PowerPoint slides or other media, with limited or no audience interaction.

A facilitator however is someone who helps a person or group of people understand a common objective, and a facilitator’s job is to make the complex simple. A facilitator is responsible for creating an effective learning environment, encouraging participation, promoting co-operation between delegates and linking the learning in with other experiences in training, all of which contribute towards effective training.

The way in which adults learn is different to that of students. They will usually have been outside of the classroom arena for a period of time, and the methods used to learn typically move on. Adults:

- Need to know why they need to learn about a subject.
- Absorb information more readily through their own experiences.
- Take in the most information when the topic has an immediate value to them, either in their business or personal life.

This is predominantly referred to as experiential learning. In depth studies into the learning abilities of adults show that they retain 30% of what they see, 20% of what they hear, 50% of what they see and hear,



but 90% of what they see and do. This suggests that the best way to retain information is for delegates to engage throughout in more of a workshop environment as opposed to classroom based learning in the lecture style.

The most effective training courses utilise this information fully, using a modular approach whereby information is built up in workshops over a period of time, as opposed to the short sharp shock treatment involving the dreaded ‘information dump’.

The key to effective training will always be planning. Winston Churchill famously said ‘those who fail to plan, plan to fail’. Rarely will a presentation hastily prepared be your best work, and the same can be said for training. To plan an effective training programme involves a number of areas, which are summarised as follows.

Planning and design

Planning your session is vitally important. Without considering key elements it is unlikely that your session will be as useful as it should have been.

Consider who your target market is as this will help you to develop key criteria. If the training is aimed at new starters, there is a good chance that their prior knowledge will be limited, so an introductory level may be advisable. If you are targeting experienced professionals in a particular field, pitching the content at a beginner level is unlikely to be useful.

Sending out short questionnaires to delegates is an excellent way to tailor your training session, providing the right questions are asked. Examples include: level of experience with the subject matter; issues they would like to discuss which the subject matter touches upon; and what do they want to get out of the session.

Keep the questions short but to the point. Encourage delegates to return the information to you by a specific deadline. This will enable you to make tweaks to your material.

Commitment

Ensure you have commitment from delegates. People will tend to be more attentive and more involved if they believe that the reason for attendance at the training session is their idea, even if in reality it isn’t.

Coaching tools utilise this mentality regularly, pushing a person to consider how a problem can be solved and through what courses of action.

Consider how many of the delegates booked late i.e. within a couple of days of the training date. The majority of late bookers (not all) tend to be those who have been directed to attend a course, or have no real desire to gain anything from it.

It is the facilitator’s job to ensure that those who may have that mentality ultimately gain as much from the session as those who have a real desire to be there.

Preparation

Delegate preparation prior to training sessions can also be of use, providing that you tailor the preparation accordingly to the target audience. Reading materials are an excellent way to ensure that delegates have at least a basic understanding of the subject topic, in addition to providing a baseline from which to prepare your materials.

Keep pre training manageable. Directing delegates to read War and Peace for instance is not only unlikely to be done, but as adults only retain 30% of what they see the knowledge retention will not be significant.

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cant. Short notes or specific pages within reference texts tend to work the best.

The delegate pack can also be a useful tool. The pack must be useful, but it should not contain 'spoilers'. Many training sessions have hit the rocks when copies of PowerPoint slides have been given out beforehand containing all the answers.

Reference sources, copies of the pre-course reading and lined paper should also be provided.

Venue selection

The venue can make or break the success of a training session. The impact of a training session can be severely undermined by poor venue choice. Consider the following in addition to price:

- Access to fresh air.
- Natural light.
- Comfortable room temperature.
- No outside noise/distractions.
- Enough space for tables to be set to ensure everyone can see each other.
- Space to break out into smaller work groups.
- Comfortable seats (not sleep inducing).

Evaluation

It is inherently difficult to see flaws in your own work. Feedback is an excellent opportunity for the great idea for 'next time', but is often missed because feedback has not been considered. The simplest way to obtain feedback is by using a feedback sheet.

Ensure you ask questions about particular sections of the session; what they enjoyed; what they would have liked to have been done differently; and how they believe they can use the information in their day to day lives. Leave the forms anonymous to obtain honest feedback.

Feedback forms should be given out on the first day and, for those sessions lasting more than one day, encouraged to be completed at the end of each day whilst the session is still fresh in their minds. Getting as many sheets back as possible is essential to improve training sessions, and there will usually be at least one comment to incorporate in future sessions.

Designing the session

Delegates attend for the contents, not pre course materials and evaluation. There are a number of ways to formulate an effective training session, and I find the 'Conditions of Learning' theory of psychologist Robert Gagne quite useful. The format relies upon nine 'instructional events' that he found elicit effective learning. Those events are as follows together with examples:

- Gain their attention.
- Use icebreakers to elicit focus.

– Use case studies and real life situations linked to the subject.

- Identify the objective.
- The subject matter of the training session.
- Recall any prior learning.
- Delegates share their experiences of the subject matter.
- Present stimulus.
- Present the facts and detail of the training.
- Present the information behind the subject matter.
- Guide the learning.
- Evaluate examples of areas where the subject matter can be found lacking.
- Elicit performance.
- Create action plans with delegates to utilise the information and experiences gained for use outside of the session.
- Provide feedback.
- Discuss action plans with the group and share thoughts.
- Assess performance.
- Identify the best examples of action plans and suggest ways to improve others.
- Enhance retention/transfer.
- Summarise and quiz delegates. A quiz after each module enhances retention, a final quiz aids bedding in.

The above is by no means the only way to carry out training, merely a format I have used which I find particularly effective and adaptable regardless of the subject matter.

During the event

The way a training session runs will stick in the minds of delegates. Consider the following checklist prior to the event:

- Set up the venue in advance of delegates arriving, the day before if possible.
- Check the venue is booked and facilities in the room sufficient.
- Make acquaintance with the venue manager. Note contact details in the event of any problems arising.
- Ensure a secure area is available for belongings.
- Clarify smoking areas. Yes some people still smoke and their comfort is as much a priority as anyone else's.
- Make the venue easy to find. Put up signs indicating the name of the event, start time and the direction.
- Notify the venue of break times to ensure refreshments are available.
- Check the information packs contain the correct information.
- Check your equipment works.
- Be there BEFORE your delegates. Welcome them into the venue, introduce yourself and point them to the comfort areas and refreshments if available.
- Check everyone who has booked for the training session has arrived.

Delivering the session

Once the event is underway it is important to try to stick to a planned timetable. Dele-

gates are often by themselves, and as a result are sometimes defensive. Prising delegates out of their shell to interact is key to effective training delivery. Consider ice breakers to help force delegates to focus on the training session and the people within. Examples include:

- Dividing the group into pairs (if there is an odd number then the facilitator should also join in). Each person in each pair has 20 seconds to give the other person their name and two facts about them. The listener can not write the information down and must remember the facts. Roles are then reversed. Each person takes it in turns to introduce the other to the group and relay the facts. This is an excellent way to start off close interaction between delegates and can help bonding for the training session ahead. It also serves to kick start the memory and to focus.
- Each person stands up and introduces themselves. They also have to give two facts, one true and one false. The rest of the group have to decide which is which. This exercise can show hidden talents and claims to fame, and encourages creative thinking and group interaction.

There are many more ice breakers on the internet which can be as simple or complex as you want them.

As you deliver the session, watch your delegates closely. Training style may need to be adapted if participation is proving difficult or eyes are drooping. Quickly amend your style if necessary to ensure the training remains effective.

After the session

At this stage your delegates will be tired, but will hopefully have enjoyed the session and be taking away the key learnings.

Ensure evaluation forms are completed and returned. Standing by the door as delegates leave ensures you get all the forms back in.

Feedback may include criticism, but it is important to take this away and to work on those elements to continually adapt and evolve the material.

Evaluating the long term benefit of sessions can prove difficult if the training has been delivered to delegates outside of your organisation. Offering your contact details for any questions is a simple thing but can be very effective.

Forums are also an excellent way to monitor how much of the information has been retained, and gives delegates opportunities to post issues which other delegates can discuss and offer remedies or support, improving the knowledge of the collective.

The above is merely my interpretation of effective training and many training facilitators use different techniques successfully. Feel free to use what you wish and to offer any suggestions, I am always looking to improve. ■

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