Creating a Positive Learning Environment

Objective

Terminal Objective (TO): Given a scenario involving specific student behavior(s) being displayed in a classroom situation, determine the appropriate course of action for the instructor to take that will result in him or her maintaining a positive and professional learning environment.

Enabling Objectives (EO): In order to reach the TO each student should, by the end of the lesson, be able to…

01. Define positive/negative learning environment.
02. Explain why it important to establish a positive learning environment before, during, and after the body of a training presentation has been delivered.
03. Describe how to establish a positive leaning environment before, during, and after the body of a training presentation has been delivered.
04. Define disruptive behavior.
05 Explain types of disruptive behavior.
06. Give examples of trainee behaviors that can be a distraction to the training environment.
07. Describe how to deal with difficult trainees during a training presentation.
08. Describe different forms of diversity.
09. Explain how factors of diversity impact the way students interact and respond to others in the classroom environment.
10. Provide tips on how to manage classroom diversity.

How to Handle Subtle Disruptions

Astute trainers plan an intervention early in a training session which can provide an opportunity for participants to examine and discuss their own assumptions and perceptions of reality. It should occur immediately after a review of the training objectives.

The intervention should be introduced as a way for participants to take personal responsibility for the success of the forthcoming training experience. It can replace or supplement a traditional icebreaker as a way of addressing participant questions and concerns.

The intervention can take the form of a lecture, discussion, or simulation, or can be a combination of the three, to allow participants an opportunity for introspection and discussion. A 20-minute segment should be enough for most half-day or day-long training experiences.

If you sense real hostility toward the training, or higher than usual tension levels, you may want to identify specific perceptions and their sources. This can be done in small groups, in which participants identify assumptions and perceptions. Then discuss strategies for putting them to rest, at least for the time of the training.

Deliberate attention to subtle disruptions can transform a training group from a loosely knit collection of strangers to a supportive learning community. Surfacing those assumptions and perceptions of reality is an honest and candid way to help adults become conscious about their training behavior. And the discussion can help the trainer learn enough about trainees to plan more effective learning experiences for the participants, both within the workshop and back on the job.

Intervention gives training participants the chance to discuss openly what most of them are already thinking. They learn a safe, nonjudgmental vocabulary they can use to monitor and manage their own behavior and to understand the motivations of group members whose behavior may be interfering with everyone's learning. Once the assumptions and perceptions of reality have been identified, understood, and appropriately managed, training participants can concentrate instead on successful learning.

From "Training 101". *Training and Development Journal*. March 1993.

Disruptive Behavior Exercise

Often in a training session, participants may exhibit non-productive behavior. An instructor can use some positive techniques to combat this behavior and refocus the group. One way is to learn to read non-verbal messages from the participants.

Few, if any, non-verbal signals consistently have the same meaning, and none have precise meanings. A few scattered displays of any particular signal may or may not be significant. The key lies in what types of signals are occurring and how often they are observed.

Listed below are eight common disruptive behaviors with space provided to write suggestions for handling them.

1. **Everyone looks bored.**

        Examples: --   Eyes glazing over
                                    --   People squirming
                                    --   Yawning

Techniques:

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The experienced instructor will be alert to potential "sleepy time" segments during the lesson design phase and will plan alternatives to hold in reserve just in case.

Alternatives:

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2. **Everyone will not participate.**

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3.   Ramblers monopolize the discussion.

Participants will hold you responsible for controlling these people but will insist you do it with diplomacy.

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4.   Private conversation erupts.

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5.   Two trainees begin arguing.

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6.   Interruptions may occur.

Examples: --   Late comer finding seat
                   --   Phone messages
                   --   When computers are being used, trainee sends print
                          job or tries printing out a command file during lecture
                          or video training

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7.   Trainee expresses anger.

Examples: --   Gripes or complaints
                   --   Makes personal attacks on outsiders
                   --   Trainees are upset because they are being forced to
                          use new technology, i.e. computers

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8.   Trainees have different knowledge levels.

You may be able to avoid this situation by requiring prerequisites or pre-course assignments. If you find yourself in this situation, especially with hands-on training which uses computers or other equipment, here are some suggestions.

Examples: Trainee has never used a computer/equipment
                                     before--may be intimidated or may ask all
                                     kinds of irrelevant questions
                           --   Trainee jumps ahead because they think they know
                                     everything and then they get into an area where they
                                     need help
                           --   Experienced trainee becomes impatient and bored
                                     because the pace of the class is too slow

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Effectively dealing with disruptive behavior is the instructor's responsibility. Participants expect you as the instructor to maintain a non-threatening learning environment. The other participants are there to learn and want their time spent productively. So, it is up to you as the instructor to take the lead in dealing with disruptions in class.

Disruptive behavior is not all bad. It may at times keep the presenter on the right course. It is a way of signaling that something is wrong. Learn to recognize it and respond to it appropriately. If you don't expect problems they usually won't occur. The number of occurrences within BLM have been few.

> *A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.   —Henry B. Adams*
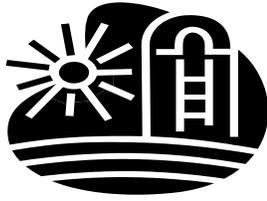
Setting the Learning Climate

The first few minutes of the training are the most crucial. If they are interesting, relevant, and pleasant, problems which may arise later can be resolved with a minimum of loss to the learning. If the first minutes are boring, pointless, and unpleasant, the most precious gems of learning are likely to be lost in the mud of misunderstanding, incomprehension, or apathy. If you cannot always produce a positive attitude toward learning, you should at least attempt to ensure that you are not the cause of a negative one. Paraphrasing Mager, the learning climate should be arranged in such a way that the participant is in the presence of as many pleasant conditions as possible and as few as possible unpleasant ones.

This is a tall order, but if you did you planning well and if you planned an environment for adults, you have already taken a giant step in setting a pleasant learning climate.

What remains? Let's take it step by step.

1. Greeting Participants

Adults seem to respond better to a handshake than a cold stare meaning "take your seat." They like the sound of their names better than "you there" or "you people." They are accustomed to addressing leaders in terms other the "Herr Professor" or "Sarge." They are often less forward than children in sidling-up to say "hi" to the new adult. Introductions are in order all around. Nametags or place cards may also be useful in keeping salutations personal.

2. Getting Everyone Comfortable.

Adults respond better to the warm offer of strong coffee than to the warm/cold introduction of a strong/weak speaker. They usually prefer to find their own seats rather than having seats assigned. The announcement of coming breaks and restroom locations is a load off everyone's mind. Invitations to move chairs or change them, sit on the floor, and remove coats and ties adds the comfort of home.

3. Spelling out the Ground Rules

Adults (unlike most children) are very interested in knowing the rules of the game. In this case, "spelling them out" amounts to describing in general terms the ways in which participants and resources may relate during the learning experience. In the democratic approach, it might go something like this:

"These resources (people, materials) are here for you. Feel free to use them, call for more, whatever. Stop me (us) if you don't understand something; suggest that we move on if you already understand it."

4. Warming Up

Adults are people who are overworked and underslept. Adults are people who have pressing concerns beyond the learning experience. Adults are people whose minds are wont to wander to those concerns. Warm-ups help adults wake up. They lighten the burden of concerns. If related to the content, warm-ups produce a climate of "readiness."

5. Discussing Expectations

By this I mean general preview of what is to come followed by a discussion of its relevance. This leads to the next activity in the training, agreeing on objectives. If for some reason expectations don't match the previewed activities, the time to start discussing changes is now, before you plow into a recitation of preset objectives. Adults are people who respond better to objectives (self-set or not) if the objectives meet their expectations. Expectations can change. Adults are people who respond better to objectives that they know they can change (at least a little). Besides, objectives that are open to change are changed less often and more often achieved.

These are the major steps; you may think of others.

> *Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.*
> *—William B. Yeats*

Managing Diversity in the Classroom

Workplace diversity is one of the most challenging, frustrating and exciting aspects of American business. A microcosm of that diversity exists in the training room. As instructors, we encounter many types of diversity.

- Different knowledge levels
- Desires for varying amounts of detail
- Different levels of commitment or conflicting agendas
- Different levels of responsibility and influence in the organization.
- Different thinking patterns or different learning styles.
- Different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

You can avoid many problems with diversity through thoughtful planning. For other problems you must be flexible and resourceful during a presentation, knowing how to adapt and respond to classroom conditions as they arise.

When you prepare rigorously and show respect for all trainees, classroom diversity enriches the environment. Training becomes more rewarding for you, the trainees, and the organization. The following measures can help you prepare for and facilitate learning in a diverse group:

Tips for Reaching a Diverse Training Group

- Prepare yourself and your materials.

- Display the objectives and agenda and stay in control of the course objectives.

- Get to know and maintain contact with participants.

- Begin with an informative, motivational, and interpersonal warm-up.

- Use simple language and concrete examples.

- Use clear visual aids.

- Show the participants what you want them to do.

- Spotlight the participants: Listen, ask questions (use reverse and relay questions), and trainee presentations.

- Use frequent small-group activities.

- Maintain respect for every person in the classroom.

Pleasant Weather for Learning

Every farmer knows the number-one variable for a successful harvest is the climate during the growing season. While quality of seeds, richness of soil and fertilization all play important roles, it is the weather that primarily determines bumper crops and dust bowls.

The climate plays an equally important part in the growth of people. While quality of the learning design, relevance of content, and time of the program all play an important role, it is the learning climate that makes the difference between quality growth and mere attendance.

Why is climate vital to adult learning? Facilitating a change in skill, knowledge, or attitude is sometimes difficult. Learners come to a program having invested many years in being the way they are. A measure of risk is required to let go of comfortable old habits and attempt awkward new ones. The risk is heightened when such attempts occur in the presence of others.

A supportive, encouraging learning climate fosters risk taking. The more learners believe they are among people who care that they succeed, the more they will experiment with new behavior or views. Experimentation is essential to productive growth.

A proper learning climate does not establish itself automatically but evolves in two ways: through the initial activities built into the design and through the trainer's words and actions.

Equally important in setting and maintaining a positive climate is what you bring to the situation – your voice quality, movements, state of mind, and the way you project yourself (formal or informal, precise or easy-going, personal or impersonal).

From the beginning of the learning program, try to adopt language and actions that support a productive, positive climate – informal but businesslike, concerned about individual and their reactions but also concerned about accomplishing the tasks at hand. A few suggestions are discussed below.

Before the Session:

- Early in the lesson, describe your role as guide and facilitator.

- Tell participants that, while you have ideas to present, you are interested in their ideas as well.

- Describe the objectives for the session and provide a notion of how time will be managed.

- Let participants know whether you prefer them to hold questions until the end of the lesson or ask questions as they come to mind.

During the Session

- Before each break, briefly review major points, and your plans for the work immediately following the break. This helps to maintain momentum and provides a sense of predictability and security.

- Occasionally, poll the group to ascertain the relevance of the material you are presenting.

- Model climate-setting instructions. For example, as you encourage participants to get comfortable, do so yourself.

- Occasionally, move between groups during class discussions to foster openness and greater informality.

Your Attitude

- Adopt an attitude respectful of the learners' individuality and experience. Be open to ideas different from those you present.

- Adopt a caring attitude and show it. Treat participants as individuals, not a homogeneous group. Make supportive comments and identify what is right in each comment and person. Inaccurate answers can be flagged without putting down the person who voiced them.

- Take the learning process seriously but do not take yourself too seriously. A superior or righteous attitude interferes with learning.

Your Language

The language most conducive to climate setting facilitates rather than controls.

- Avoid embarrassing or humiliating participants – in word, tone, body language, or by not recognizing their work.

- Avoid dictating requests based on your personal desires. For example, "Do the exercise just like I told you to do it."

- Never use language, humor, or anecdotes that might offend any group of people – whether these groups are represented in your training group or not. For example, "Yo homeskillet, why don't you go ahead and read that passage to the group."

TRAINING PREPARATION CHECKLIST

STEP 1: KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

❑   How large will your audience be?

❑   Where are they from?

❑   What are their jobs/field positions?

❑   Do any participants have expertise that you can draw on in the training?

❑   Does anyone have a disability requiring attention to seating, special equipment, etc.?

❑   What other characteristics typify this group?

STEP 2: KNOW THE OCCASION

❑   Is this training formal or more casual?

❑   Will there be other instructors? If so, in what order do you instruct?

❑   How important is your role? Do you have any special responsibilities?

❑   How much time will you have?

STEP 3: KNOW YOUR TRAINING ENVIRONMENT

❑   How large is the training room?

❑   How will it be arranged? Is there adequate seating and working space?

❑   What other characteristics of the room will constrain or facilitate the training?

❑   What equipment will you use? Is it present? Do you know how to operate it? Can everyone see/hear it?

❑   Will you use a microphone? If so is it fixed or portable? Corded or wireless?

STEP 4: PIN DOWN YOUR TOPIC

❑   What subject are you responsible for presenting?

❑   What is the least they need to know?

❑   What are the key points that must be covered?

STEP 5: BRAINSTORMING AND RESEARCH

❑   Have you included stories, examples, illustrations, exercises, and/or other factual evidence?

❑   Have you drawn on the expertise of others?

❑   Does your material reflect current information and/or policy?

❑   Have you organized training materials, manuals, and handouts for ease of access and use?

STEP 6: TRANSFER YOUR IDEAS TO A LESSON PLAN

❑   Have you prepared an outline or manuscript lesson plan?

❑   Have you made your lesson plan easy to read with clear lettering and plenty of open space?

❑   Have you numbered all handouts, manual pages, and overhead transparencies so you won't get confused?

❑   Have you developed a backup strategy in case time runs short or equipment fails?

STEP 7: PRACTICE

❑   Have you created practice conditions as similar as possible to your actual training environment?

❑   Have you practiced presentation skills such as eye contact; variation of voice pitch, rate and volume; movement and posture?

❑   Have you exaggerated gestures and forced yourself to use them in every sentence during some of your practice sessions?

❑   Have you practiced skills to use in asking and responding to questions?

❑   Have you recorded yourself on video or audiotape and evaluated your performance?

❑   Have you practiced before an audience of at least one?

❑   Have you practiced using equipment, visual aids, and handouts that you will use?

❑   Have you practiced facilitating and assessing group tasks and exercises that will be used?

❑   Have you practiced to the point where your lesson flows smoothly?

The Training Environment

Room Arrangement and Peripherals

Learning environments enhance learning when they are colorful, comfortable, and humanly stimulating. Room arrangements are often best when they suggest collaboration and team-based learning rather than human isolation or stiff military formality. Clustered seating seems to work well to create a collaborative feeling in a training room.

"Peripherals" are anything that surround the learner with learning material in a positive, colorful and stimulating way. Peripherals could include music, wall hangings, mobiles, table-top displays, objects, and the like. The overall effect should be to give the learner a comfortable, human, and positive feeling about the learning environment while providing preview and review reinforcement.

Source: David Meier of the Center for Accelerated Learning in Lake Beneva, Wisconsin. Instructor of Accelerated Training Workshop in October, 1991.

A Room of One's Own

Setting the right mood for a training session can be as crucial as having the right materials. People react in different ways to different environments, often subconsciously. The trick is knowing the appropriate atmosphere for your objectives—and knowing how to achieve it.

An austere, utilitarian setup says to trainees, "Let's get down to business an get this over with." A cheerful, homey room with snacks, music, and fresh flower arrangements sends a different message entirely: "We're here to learn from each other, so let's take the time to relax so that we can be open and honest and really communicate."

Of course, most training sessions fall between those extremes. In any case, an atmosphere that is business-like and free of distractions (while being upbeat and comfortable) helps people focus their attention on the course content, rather than on the construction noises outside the window, the heater that doesn't know when to quit, or the fact that the chairs seem to have been designed for users from another planet.

Ugly surroundings depress people. If you're stuck with walls the color of pea soup, concrete floors, glaring lights, and flea-market furniture, you should realize how that can affect the mood of your class—and maybe consider some ways to compensate, if you can't get another meeting place.

Source: "Training 101" by Cathy Petrini from the *Training & Development Journal*. November. 1989.

Climate Control

The quality of the instructor and the degree of preparation are of paramount importance to the success of a training session, but three other considerations are often overlooked: the "climate," the training environment, and the design of the meeting space.

1. *Climate* refers to participants' reactions to the stimuli of the training area. Such feelings are real, but they are usually subconscious. They represent an overall impression—good, bad, or neutral.

2. The training *environment* involves the physical parts of the meeting area: its decor, furniture, and other furnishings.

3. The room *design* considers such factors as size and kinds of spaces.

The trainer must pay attention to these three factors, if the session is to achieve the greatest result and live up to the potential inherent in the dynamics of the learning process. Climate, environments, and room design contribute in various ways to the success of a training session.

Optimum Participation

The value of a training session is in the combined input of all participants. Each person should have a sense of identity with the entire group and should be able to easily hear and see every other participant. Nobody should feel left out.

To ensure that everyone feels a part of the discussion group, consider the room dimensions. Rooms should not be long and narrow. This forces participants to sit too far apart, giving a sense of isolation to people at the end of the room. Instead, rooms should be as square as possible.

Remember, the length of a room should not exceed its width by more than 50 percent (in other words, a room that is 20 feet wide should not be more than 30 feet long). Dividers can be used to "square off" a long, narrow room.

Physical Comfort and Psychological Ease

When participants enter a training room, their first impression should be feelings of warmth, brightness, cheerfulness, and difference. They should feel that the room is a special place. It should not appear austere or make-do and should not look like the décor of an office or of the surrounding work spaces. Certain features will help promote those positive feelings:

- Special Chairs: The best are rich-looking and can swivel. They should have wheels, reclining backs, arms, form seats, and colored upholstery.
- Lighting: Evenly spaced fluorescent lights will give a warm, bright, natural glow throughout the room.

- Wall covering: Walls should be in cheerful, upbeat hues of green, blue, orange, or yellow. A vinyl covering is better than paint.
- Chair spacing: For ease of movement, provide a space of two and a half feet between chairs.
- Distance from table to walls: Participants will feel less cramped and overcrowded if the edge of the table is seven to eight feet from the wall behind the chairperson and four to five feet from the three walls.

Sense of Equality

Participants should not feel "second class" in a training session, but the typical classroom setup can engender such a feeling. The traditional arrangement (rows of tables and chairs with the trainer at the podium in the center) is often to blame.

The central podium underscores the trainer's power and position. Those sitting close to center front can readily engage in quiet conversations. Those at the far ends and back of the room, removed from the "power" source, may feel left out and remote from the action focus.

A U-shape arrangement provides several advantages:

- It gives attendees equal "territory."
- It pulls participants closer together and makes it easier for them to hear and see one another.
- It fosters a sense of group solidarity.

Reduce Pressure

Participants may feel under pressure during training sessions. Passions can grow during heated exchanges, building subtle duress; expressions of conflicting points of view can cause resentments and even the intensity of discussion and the need for concentration can cause tension. In addition, people get tired mentally and physically from sitting in one place and absorbing information for several hours.

Morning and afternoon breaks provide a change of pace and a chance for relaxation. It may be best to hold breaks in a room or area separate from the training room to offer a fresh and new environment.

Plan to take advantage of the break's informality. In a separate, relaxed space, the trainer may be able to talk informally with participants and can deal with problems in one-on-one conversations with them.

Maintain Focus

Participants in a training session must concentrate on what's going on, in order to achieve the highest levels of learning and participation. That mental set is not easy for some people who have not had to focus their attention in such a way since they were in

school. They may be used to moving around throughout their day-to-day work, busy with a variety of tasks. Now they must sit for extended periods of time.

Certain elements in the training environment can affect the concentration level of participants. The heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning system should allow individual control from each room so that the chairperson can adjust it for the comfort of the group. It must operate quietly. The system should be able to clear the air and keep it fresh, especially if smoking is permitted. Stale air and noise from the system will affect concentration.

Studies indicate that windows in a training room are not conducive to learning. They let in outside noise, encourage participants to gaze outdoors, affect levels of lighting in the room as the day passes, and affect room temperature as the mercury rises and falls outside. Those factors can interfere with concentration and add to mental fatigue.

Pictures on the wall can be distracting as attendees study them rather than paying attention to the discussion. Only training related material should be on the walls.

When a body or mind becomes tired, a person's ability to think effectively is reduced. Some common elements of training areas should be avoided because they can lead to fatigue. They include light shining in the eyes of participants, from such reflective surfaces as mirrors, glass, and metal; outside noises; poor lighting, uncomfortable chairs; over-heated rooms; and bad air quality.

The door to a training room should be on the wall away from the trainer. People should not have to pass by the trainer in order to enter or leave the room, because their movements can disturb and interrupt the concentration of the group.

In Summary

Paying attention to the details of a training room's climate, environment, and design may not require a large investment. It does require careful and knowledgeable planning and an objective look at traditional approaches to one of the most prevalent person-to-person activities in organizations.

Source: Coleman Finkel of the Conference Center Development Corporation in New York, New York. *Training & Development Journal*, November 1989.

Room Set-Up Preferences