

What Makes a Great Trainer?

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Introduction

What makes a great trainer? To begin with, I should probably define a trainer, and then decide what makes a trainer a great trainer. A trainer is a person who helps a group of people become proficient in a specialized set of skills. Training is generally different from teaching or coaching in that the trainer spends a limited amount of time with the learners and develops the learner's skills rather than knowledge. While a teacher will set the desired outcomes for their students, the trainer will negotiate the outcomes so that they will match the learner's expectations. Also, teaching generally involves theory and practice, and training involves a set of skills and behaviors. In order for a trainer to be a great trainer, the students must feel that they have achieved the desired results from the training session. The goal of a training session is for all elements to come together in order for a successful transfer of a set of skills from a trainer to the learners. A great trainer will ensure that the training session was successful and that the learners came away from the session confident and able to use their newly acquired skills and knowledge in appropriate settings, which may be different from the situations presented in the training session. I think a great trainer is an active participant in the learning process who facilitates the sharing of his or her knowledge with a group of learners. To do this successfully, the trainer must be aware of the elements involved in the training process. I have divided these elements into the trainer, the learner, and the transfer of knowledge between the trainer and the learners. Each element is important in the training

session, and all participants will have pre-formed expectations about the role of each element. A great trainer will be able to negotiate these elements and corresponding expectations in order to achieve the desired results.

The Trainer

The successful trainer must play many roles, possess specific qualities, and deal with the preconceptions of the learner when presenting a training session. One of the most important roles the trainer plays is that of a facilitator. As a facilitator the trainer makes the transfer of knowledge easy for the participants. According to Barbara Allen in her book, *Training Skills for Library Staff*, a facilitator: “believes that the learning relationship is one of facilitator and participant as equal partners, believes that the learners have all the resources within them, is centered on the learners and providing support, creates rapport with the learners, sees themselves as learners, focuses on the learning process, encourages learners to participate, is flexible, asks lots of questions, coaches and supports the group and individuals, seeks consensus solutions, works within a loose framework, and encourages lots of feedback on the training material, learning processes, group processes and the trainer.” In addition to the role of a facilitator, the trainer also plays the roles of an expert in the subject matter, a counselor, a listener, and a dedicated teacher. The qualities a good trainer must possess include being a good communicator in order to explain to the learners the skills they are learning, and a good listener in order to understand questions and be able to answer them to help clarify problems that the learners may be having. The trainer must be professional, and not let personal problems or issues hinder the teaching process. He or she must be non-judgmental, and especially must not make a learner feel intimidated, or that they are

doing something wrong. Being observant is also important in order to tell if there are any questions, and to see the general attitude or understanding of the class. He or she also must be flexible and able to adjust plans in order to take into account the personality of the class, or any problems that may have arisen during the session. The learners will also expect the trainer to be dedicated and willing to work through problems in order for them to understand the set of skills that they are developing. The trainer must also be aware of any strength or weakness which he or she processes that may unduly influence the way that they teach.

Assertiveness is also an important quality, so that during the session the trainer is able to effectively communicate with the learners. Assertive trainers are successful because: they know what they want to achieve, are aware of their own feelings, are sensitive to others, respect themselves, say what they think and how they feel, give others opportunities to say how they think or feel, and feel comfortable giving constructive feedback.

The learners will arrive at the session with specific preconceptions about what they feel the trainer should be and be able to offer to them. The successful trainer will meet these expectations and be able to give the learners what they want from the session. These expectations of the trainer include that they are knowledgeable, show concern for student learning, present material clearly, motivate the students, emphasize the relevance of class materials, and are enthusiastic. In addition to these qualities, the trainer must have designed the training session to meet a specific set of objectives, and must be able to communicate these objectives and the steps required to achieve them.

One of the most important qualities I expect in a trainer is that they are knowledgeable in their subject matter. If I have taken time from my daily schedule, I expect to learn something from the session in order for it to be a worthwhile experience. Another quality I look for in a trainer is that they treat everyone in the session as equals to themselves. Even though the trainer hopefully knows the subject matter better than the learners, the trainer may still learn from watching the participants and listening to their questions and feedback. In addition, each member of the session has their own personal experiences and backgrounds, and deserves respect for their own accomplishments.

Creativity is also necessary for trainers. Training situations will present many unusual challenges and difficulties, and the trainer must be able to quickly find solutions. “Creativity involves making new ideas or putting together new combinations of existing ideas.” Creative people are open minded and willing to listen to other suggestions, as well as able to brainstorm on their own.

Even though I could continue listing many more qualities a trainer must possess, I think that I have covered most of the necessary ones. Most importantly, the trainer must enjoy what they are doing. If they are happy and in control of the situation, the learners will respond favorably and will benefit from the training session.

The Learner

“Adults expect learner-centered settings where they can set their own goals and organize their own learning around their present life needs.” When the learners arrive at the training session, each learner will have different reasons why they are learning, different needs, goals, and expectations from the session, different hopes and fears about the process, different feelings about the event, different motivations for attendance, and different confident levels. They will also have different backgrounds and experiences with the subject, different learning styles, and different abilities. The trainer needs to take these differences into account in order to develop a successful training session. It is important for the trainer to respect the class’s diversity and to acknowledge the backgrounds that various members of group may bring with them.

Even though each learner will have a different background and personality, one emotion many members of the session will share is a sense of apprehension and stress about the session. There are several causes of learner stress including: arguments with colleagues the trainer or other participants; low self-esteem and lack of self-belief; negative self-talk; inability to connect learning with personal goals or values; belief that the work is too difficult or that success is unattainable; restimulation of negative experiences in school or other training events; physical or intellectual difficulties in accessing the learning material; poor sight or hearing; learning difficulties; and distractions in the learning environment. One of the first things the trainer must do is alleviate the apprehensions of the learners by showing them that there is nothing to fear. The trainer must demonstrate to the learners that he or she is knowledgeable, friendly, and non-judgmental. Several people I have spoken with enjoy the use of humor to break

the ice, lighten the mood, and establish a rapport between the trainer and the learners. Also, the trainer must never blame the learners for anything that may go wrong, and should focus instead on using positive language.

The next challenge facing the trainer is to keep the attention and focus of the learners. The trainer must be sensitive to the fact that listening to a session is much different from teaching it. While the trainer must stay engaged and focused, the learner's attention may shift and wander, especially at key times during the day, for example mid-morning or after lunch. The best way for the trainer to keep the focus of the group is to provide many varied activities, as well as opportunities for the learners to stand up and move around.

The kind of training and coaching people are given makes a big difference in how much they will retain. I found a statistic that said that, in general, people in a learning situation retain: 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they see and hear, 70% of what they talk over with others, 80% of what they use and do in real life, and 95% of what they teach someone else to do. A group of learners will also have many different styles of learning as well as ways of approaching a problem. A current theory is that there are four main types of learning styles: pragmatists, activists, reflectors, and theorists. The pragmatists enjoy learning new theories and techniques, and often see instant applications. The activists are excited about trying anything new. They tend to act first and think about the problems afterwards. Reflectors like time and space to think things through carefully before coming to a conclusion. They listen carefully and gather information to help them make rational and considered judgments. Theorists have a methodical and logical approach to

learning. They like to analyze ideas in a detached way, asking questions and making mental connections until they have integrated new theories into a comprehensive overview. Other psychologists have identified even more types of learning and intelligence, including linguistic, mathematical, musical, visual, interpersonal, intrapersonal, emotional, and physical styles of learning. A successful trainer will take all of these learning styles into account when delivering a session so that all learning types can benefit from the presentation.

The motivations, apprehensions, and learning styles present in the participants of a training session create a challenging environment which the trainer must navigate. A successful trainer will be aware of all of these elements in order to present a session in which the learners will achieve their goals for attending the session.

The Transfer of Knowledge

A successful training session is a continuing effort on the part of the trainer. The trainer must analyze the needs of the learners, design the session, deliver the session, evaluate the session, and begin to analyze the needs for the next session. The delivery of the session is where the knowledge is transferred from the trainer to the learners, and will be what I focus on in this section. The following six steps are recommended for the delivery of the session: analyze the task to be learned, set the climate for learning, tell the learners how to do the task, show the learners how to do the task, let the learners do the task themselves, review the work in ways that reinforce their achievements and set goals for their improvement.

Analyzing the task to be learned should be done before the session, and should determine the design of the session.

Set the climate for learning. As mentioned previously, most learners will enter the session with certain apprehensions which must be set at ease for a successful session. If a learner is too busy worrying about not doing anything wrong, they probably will not have time to relax and absorb the skills being taught. The trainer must facilitate the transfer of knowledge to their peers in a non-intimidating session. Another concern adults learners have is how the skills they are learning are relevant to their job or life. If they can see a reason for learning these skills, they will be more open to learning and will be thinking of ways in which to apply the skills after the session. It is important that the trainer has a conversation with the learners and remains flexible enough to deal with any problems that may arise during the session.

Tell the learners how to do the task. The best way to do this is to approach the topic from a variety of different angles so that each different type of learner in the group has his or her needs addressed. An important part of this is to restate any points which may have confused different members of the group, as well as to show different ways of doing things if at all possible. Just because the trainer is most comfortable doing things a certain way doesn't mean that that way is the best approach for the learner.

Show the learner how to do the task. This will ensure that the visual learners have their needs met as well as the aural learners. Showing the learners how to do the task includes having the learners do it while the trainer is demonstrating. Again, the trainer should be aware of different learning styles and be able to accommodate these differing styles without forcing their own way on any individual.

Let the learners do the task themselves. The participants will want to be an active part of the training process. This is the time when the learners are able to approach the task without the direct assistance of the trainer. Group activities, individual hands-on experience, quizzes, and many other interactive learning techniques may be used in this step. Some learners may prefer to work with other members of the class at this point while different learners will prefer to work on their own. The trainer should not be overbearing in this step, but should be available to answer any questions or comment appropriately on the progress of the learners.

Review the work in ways that reinforce the learner's achievements and set goals for their improvement. This may include a question and answer session or a review of the activity from the previous step. The learners should also leave the class aware of

ways in which they can improve or become more proficient in the skills. This will ensure their continued motivation after the session has been completed.

It is important that the trainer has designed the class with enough time to use each of the steps mentioned above. The learners will learn best if the class does not become monotonous and they are given plenty of opportunity to move around and remain focused on the class materials. They will also benefit from a variety of teaching techniques, including telling, showing, and hands-on activities. A great trainer will guarantee that a proper learning environment is set so that the participants are able to achieve their own goals.

Conclusion

Each element of a training session must be successfully navigated in order for a trainer to be a great trainer. A great trainer acknowledges themselves, the learners, and the transfer of knowledge as important elements in the training session. The interaction of these elements creates several challenges for the trainer. He or she must respect the preconceptions of the learners regarding the session and the trainer, the learner's motivations for attending the event, the group dynamics, and the ability levels of the participants. The trainer must also acknowledge his or her roles in the learning process, the qualities that they must possess, and the best possible ways in which to communicate with the learner. In addition to navigating the human elements present in the session, the trainer must develop and present the material in a way that clearly gives the learners the skills which they are hoping to gain by attending the session. While a successful trainer will have years of experience navigating between the variables present in training sessions, a novice trainer can benefit by the acknowledgement of the interactions of these elements. If the learner has been able to achieve their goals from the training session, as well as having a positive experience, the trainer has presented a successful training session. According to Bertrand Russell, "More important than the curriculum is the question of the methods of teaching and the spirit in which the teaching is given."

Works consulted:

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