

Communication as Basis for Participant Behavior

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When I ask members of learners in trainer development programs to define situations that they consider difficult to handle, they often tell stories about inappropriate communication. This is not surprising when you listen to how adults teach children to communicate. Look at the following statements often used when talking to children to see if they sound familiar.

- Do it because I said so (in response to “Why can’t I...”).
- Shut up and listen to me!
- Look at me when I’m talking to you!
- Children should be seen and not heard.
- Speak when spoken to.
- If I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it.
- You must/have to....
- That was a stupid thing to say.

When you think about such statements, which are often said in a harsh and autocratic voice, it is little wonder that classroom communication breaks down. How would you respond if someone used the language in these statements to you today? You would likely respond negatively or defensively. Many children do likewise. When such language is used on a regular basis throughout children’s formative years, they might not know how to listen, ask questions, or give feedback effectively as adults. We try to hold learners accountable for communicating and interacting successfully in a training or educational environment, yet many do not have the tools required for such basic communication.

Communication is an important element of successful training and education. You can increase your effectiveness while reducing participant-related challenges by exhibiting positive interpersonal behavior. Here are some general strategies for dealing professionally with all types of participants.

1. Project a Positive Image

Like many things in your life, a positive attitude is crucial to success. The image that you project related to learners, your topic, session preparation, and the overall learning experience can often elicit similar participant behavior. For example, if you smile, appear approachable, and are open minded, your learners will likely reciprocate. On the other hand, if you exhibit apprehension, pessimism, or skepticism, you may dampen participant enthusiasm.

2. Words and Phrases That Build Relationships

Here are some phrases that can assist in strengthening relationships within a learning environment. Such language reinforces your integrity and encourages learners to trust you more.

Please	You're right
Thank you	May I...?
I can/will...	Have you considered...?
How may I help?	I'm sorry
I'm sorry/ apologize for...	However, and, or yet (instead of <i>but</i>)
I was wrong	It's my/our fault
I understand/appreciate how you feel	Would you mind...?
Situation, issue, concern (<i>instead of problem</i>)	What do you think?
Often, many times, some (instead of always or everyone)	

3. Treat Participants as Adults

Unlike children, adults usually have specific learning goals or agendas. As Malcolm Knowles and others have written, it is important to recognize the knowledge, skills, and experiences that your participants bring to your training sessions. Drawing on their talents and expertise enhances the learning environment for everyone. Ultimately, this results in respect and an appreciation for your learners.

4. Prepare for Brain-Based Learning

The 1990s have been referred to as the “Decade of the Brain” by many researchers, educators, and trainers because so many discoveries were made related to learning and brain functioning. Much of the research done since the early 1990s has focused on what factors stimulate the human brain, aid learning and recall, and ultimately can lead to application of what is learned.

According to research findings, environmental factors, such as the use of toys, props, rewards, and active or experiential learning activities can potentially enhance a participant’s ability to learn material. Factors like room layout, type of furniture, color, lighting, use of music, plants in the room, smells, and temperature all impact the degree to which learning might occur. In general, you should build in ongoing activity and novelty to involve your learners and engage as many of their senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch) as possible throughout your sessions.

5. Listen Openly

As learners offer ideas, questions, suggestions, or feedback, take the time to patiently and objectively receive and think about their messages. Once you have done so, analyze what was said, then take appropriate action. Too often when learner feedback is perceived as challenging or argumentative, trainers and educators react defensively. If you really want learning to occur, to develop participant feedback and questioning skills, and to learn from them, establish a safe environment early in your sessions. Let learners know that their comments and opinions are welcome and that what happens in the room will stay there. This latter concept is often more crucial for internal trainers (those who are employed by an organization as opposed to ones hired to come in to provide training) who may have to overcome a perception that they represent upper management and will relay issues discussed in training to human resources or others in the organization. By establishing a safe environment and building trust and confidentiality, you can open a dialog with your learners.

6. Provide Ongoing Feedback

In many training or educational situations, learners complain that their trainer, teacher, or facilitator did not give adequate feedback on their progress and that they did not receive proper instructions for activities. This is unfortunate because participants need to know how they are doing to gauge and improve their performances. They also need to know the rules and what is expected so that they can succeed and maximize their learning potential. The key to effective feedback is that it be appropriate, timely, and adequate.

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