

Dealing with Difficult Participant Behavior

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If you ask a given group of trainers to describe the most challenging or difficult type of trainee they can think of, you will likely get a variety of responses. This is because what may be difficult to one person is not difficult to another. Even so, there are some common areas of behavior and participant characteristics that seem to create difficulty for many trainers.

A variety of factors come into play related to the ability to deal with participant behavior. The following is a partial list:

- Prior training related to handling difficult participant situations;
- Experience level of the trainer;
- Trainer age and maturity level;
- Trainer patience level;
- Personality type of the trainer;
- Trainer cultural background (e.g. values and beliefs);
- Trainer desire/attitude toward dealing with difficult situations or people;
- Training environment (e.g. room size and setup);
- Organizational culture (e.g. autocratic/bureaucratic vs. Laissez Faire);
- Available time to deal with situations.

Difficult participant situations can include learners such as those with poor attitudes (e.g. do not want to be there or think that they do not need the information being delivered), overzealous attitude (e.g. try to contribute too much or be too involved), who speak English as a Second Language, and those with a disability. Each type of learner presents unique challenges and requires different knowledge and skills for a facilitator to deal with them effectively. Notice that I say “deal with” as opposed to “handle,” which is often used to describe resolving such situations. My logic is that to be an effective trainer, facilitator, or educator, you must respect all learners and what they bring to the training environment. Therefore, you learn to deal or interact with people as opposed to “handling,” which might come across as trying to control. A learner’s good and bad behavior both come as a package deal as do their personal characteristics. If you break through to your learners by winning their trust, while showing that you have their interests at heart, I believe that you can ultimately partner with most of them to succeed. Of course there will be those who do not and will not work with you for whatever reason(s). However, by demonstrating to your learners the **Added Value And Results For Me (AVARFM)**, or showing them what they will gain by cooperating with you and putting forth their best effort, everyone benefits. A win-win situation exists as you become successful at sharing information and skills with them and they learn.

In some situations a more autocratic, disciplinary approach may be required. If you encounter such an instance, try to at least salvage the relationship. You can potentially accomplish this by showing that while you may disapprove of the participant’s behavior,

you still respect them as a person. Another point to remember is that if you fail to treat a difficult participant fairly, you may also lose their friends or colleagues in the room as they side with the learner.

Why Difficulties Exist

Adults are just kids with big bodies. They learn behaviors as children; they repeat the behaviors as adults. Unfortunately, many people had poor role models or did not learn positive behaviors when they were younger. In some cases, the role models did not mean to teach bad behavior, they simply did what they learned from their own role models – who also did a poor job teaching behaviors. Do you see a pattern here? Much of what participants do related to poor behavior can be traced to ignorance, complacency, or a lack of opportunity to gain effective knowledge or skills at some earlier point in their life.

A second major issue for anyone imparting information to others is the fact that the demographic makeup of any group of participants is likely to be widely diverse. This is because the population in the United States and the world continues to meld each day. For instance, for the first time in the history of the United States the number of entry level employees in the workforce from Hispanic cultures has surpassed that of other groups. Meanwhile, the number of people living in the U.S. who were born in other countries grows steadily. With this growth comes the challenge of interacting with people who speak different languages and possess varied values and beliefs that come together in a training environment. For you and other trainers, the opportunity is to design and deliver programs and materials that will be understood and successful. You also have to be able to facilitate communication and understanding among your groups.

One other challenge for you in training people with varied backgrounds is that there are estimated to be over 54 million people in the United States with some form of disability. As the population ages, this number will surely increase. This fact will require you and other trainers to be aware of the special needs of a many types of learners. You will need to address the learning modalities of everyone through use of appropriate and varied visual, auditory, and experiential learning materials and activities.

Communication as a Basis for Participant Behavior

When I ask 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 to see if they sound familiar.

- Do it because I said so (in response to “Why can’t I do...”).
- Shut up and listen to me!
- Look at me when I’m talking to you! (Often in a harsh or angry tone)
- 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, autocratic voice, it is little wonder the communication in the classroom breaks down. How would you respond if someone used the language in these statements towards you today? You would likely respond negatively or defensively. Many children do likewise. With such language being used on a regular basis throughout their formative years, it is logical that your participants might not know how to listen, ask questions, or give feedback effectively. We try to hold learners accountable for communicating and interacting well in a training environment, yet many do not have the tools required for such basic communication.

Communication is an important element of successful training that 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.

Strategy #1 – Project a positive image

Like many things in your life, a positive attitude is crucial in your 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.

Figure 1-1 - Words and Phrases That Build Relationships

Here are some phrases that can assist you in strengthening relationships within your 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)	

Strategy #2 - Treat participants as adults

Unlike children, adults typically have specific learning goals or agendas that they bring to a session. As Malcolm Knowles and others have written about, it is important to recognize the knowledge, skills, and experiences that your participants bring to your training sessions. Pulling from their talents and expertise enhances the learning environment for everyone involved. Ultimately, this relates to respect and an appreciation for your learners.

Strategy #3 - Prepare for brain-based learning

The 1990s have been referred to as the “Decade of the Brain” by many researchers, educators and trainers. This is because so many discoveries were made related to learning and brain functioning during that period. 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 findings, environmental factors, such as, the use of toys, props, rewards, and active or experiential learning activities can enhance a participant’s ability to learn material. Factors like room layout, type of furniture, color, lighting, use of music, plants in the room, odors, and temperature all impact the degree to which learning might occur. In general, you should build in ongoing activity and novelty in order to involve your learners and engage as many of their senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch) as possible throughout your sessions. Many of these types of items can be found in party and teacher supply stores or on websites such as www.presentationresources.net.

Strategy #4 - 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 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 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 two-way dialog with your learners.

Strategy #5 - Provide feedback

In many training situations, I have heard learners complain that their trainer or facilitator did not give them adequate feedback on their progress. Nor did they receive proper instructions for activities. This is unfortunate since participants need to know how they are doing in order to gauge and improve their performance. They also need to know the rules so that they can succeed and maximize their learning potential.

The key to effective feedback is that it be appropriate, timely, and adequate.

Overall, a key to effectively interacting with participants comes down to awareness of differences, treating others with respect, increased trainer knowledge and sound interpersonal communication skills. Strengthen these areas and you are on your way to a successful training environment.

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