

Fifteen Tips for Getting Learners Back from Break on Time

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If you have ever had learners show up late or come in from a break after you have restarted a session, you know that they can be disrupting and downright annoying. There are many reasons why I have seen this occur in the past three decades. Some typical reasons are:

- They are on-call (e.g. law enforcement, medical staff, fire fighters, or computer support staff) and receive an alert that requires their attention;
- Your session is held onsite and makes it easy for someone to come in to ask them questions or call them away;
- They make the mistake of returning to their office to check email or voicemail and get distracted;
- Their boss or a client sees them in the hallway and captures them for a meeting or discussion;
- They do not find the content or delivery stimulating enough and take their time to return.

While some of these problems will continue to exist, you can work toward reducing or eliminating many of them. In most cases, if you can hold the session off-site where they do not have access to their office or co-workers, you reduce the chance of them being called away. Secondly, if you plan your delivery and content effectively and enthusiastically approach every session using brain-based learning strategies (e.g. use of novelty, color, sound, motion, learner engagement, music, color, etc) you can generate a desire to come back to see “what’s next” in the session.

Here are some strategies for getting learners back to the session on time:

1. Create ground rules at the beginning of the session with learner input and make sure that returning on time from breaks is included. Write these on a flip chart and post the sheet for all to see during the session. Remind them of the guidelines before they leave for a break or lunch;
2. Make return times visual by writing them on the board or a flip chart or projecting an electronic count down time through your computer or on an overhead projector
3. Make sure learners have a clock in the break area and that it is synchronized with the one in your classroom that you will use to restart the session;
4. Put a notice on the door that learners are not to be disturbed except for emergencies. Also put a message board that is learners can check on their way to break to see if someone has been to the room to contact them;
5. Make sure that learners get at least one long (15-20 minute) break if doing a day long session so that they can make calls or check in at their office;
6. Break for lunch early if food is not being provided in the classroom so that learners can get ahead of the waiting lines at food establishments. Most people go to lunch at around noon so break at 11:30 or 11:45 depending on how far they

- must travel to eat. This may preclude them from getting stuck wasting much of their lunch period standing in line at a cash register or to get their food;
7. Feed learners in the classroom or an adjoining room to prevent their having to leave or wander too far from the session location;
 8. Use what newscasters have been doing for decades. Employ a teaser like, "Following our break, I am going to provide those of you who are back with one dynamic technique that will allow you to increase your production/effectiveness by 10% in the area of" Provide this strategy exactly at the scheduled restart time and do not repeat it for those who show up late. In doing this, you provide an intangible incentive to be back on time;
 9. Prepare a fun activity (e.g. crossword or trivia puzzle) that you announce will be on their chairs when they return. The first person getting the most correct answers within five minutes of the restart time, gets a prize;
 10. Do something special after each break. For example, tell a humorous story, joke or share a work related tip or perform a magic trick that ties to session content;
 11. Use peer pressure by forming teams that are used for activities and discussions during a portion of the program. Just before break, announce that the first team with all members returning on time and seated will win a prize. This puts pressure on each person to return so they do not let team members down and they all win;
 12. Close the door at the announced restart time and begin your session regardless of how many people are in the room. This gives a visual non-verbal cue that you are in control and that their cooperation is expected in making the class a success;
 13. Use music during your breaks, and at the scheduled restart time, turn the music off to signal that everyone should take a seat as you start the delivery again. It also signals those lingering in the hallway outside the door to hustle back in;
 14. Give rewards to each person returning on time (e.g. a small toy or prize related to the session content. For example, you might pass out smile face balls or toys for customer service or interpersonal relationship skills sessions;
 15. Collect money from late returnees. As part of your opening remarks establish in a lighthearted manner that anyone returning late must contribute a sum of money (let them determine the amount up to one dollar or Euro) to a tardy fund. Tell learners that at the end of the session you will have a drawing of one name to receive the fund contents. This encourages people to get back on time and rewards those who do so. It also encourages everyone to monitor tardy behavior and police it for you. Thus, you are taken out of the disciplinarian role.

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