

Gaining and Holding Learner Attention

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One of the most important parts of any learning event is effectively capturing the attention of your learners. Until you have done that, they are not ready to receive what you have to offer and much of your valuable learning opportunity will be lost.

There are many books and articles available on how to effectively provide information to others in the classroom, but they mostly boil down to one important concept. If you do not effectively gain and maintain someone's attention, you are not likely to help them receive, understand, and remember what you provided to them in the form of visual or auditory messages.

The importance of gaining and holding learner attention cannot be overstressed. Learning sessions typically consist of the following three components and keeping learners focused in each is paramount.

- *Introduction* – in which you gain attention through use of a content-related fact, activity, story, joke, demonstration, or other creative approach.

Most importantly, you want to give people a reason to listen to what you have to say by offering the Added Value And Results For Me (AVARFM) (what they are going to get from the session and how it can be used in the real world), along with the learning objectives for the session. A helpful part of this is to share your credentials and help them understand why they should listen to you, based on your expertise. You might facilitate this by sharing a personal experience and lessons learned related to the session topic.

The Introduction portion is also where you would typically cover any “administrivia” such as the schedule, breaks, location of exits and restrooms, dealing with technology (e.g. cell phones and messages).

- *Body* – in which you address each of the key concepts that will achieve the stated learning objectives.

As part of the delivery structure for each concept, it is important to use verbal *transition phrases* to help listeners recognize that you are moving from one topic to another and to help refocus their attention. An example of a transition phrase might be “Now that we have covered _____, let's take a look at another important factor, _____, and how it adds value to what we've been discussing.”

- *Conclusion* – that allows you to restate key concepts covered, hit the highlights of discussion brought out related to them, provide an opportunity for final questions and close with a powerful statement, summarizing quote, or other memorable message that relates to the session content.

Keep in mind that many people remember the first part of the session and the ending because their attention is usually higher. It is all the parts in the middle that you need to figure out how to emphasize in a way that they are alert and retain.

Brain researchers in the past couple of decades have learned much about how the brain processes information and how learning is impacted. They have figured out that such things as color, light, sound, motion, novelty, engagement/activity, nutrition, and the environment cause the neurons of the brain to fire in a way that aids assimilation and retention of information that can later be recalled and acted upon. These elements also help gain and hold learner attention. Many resources can be found on the internet related to these topics. To locate more information, search terms like brain-based learning, learning and memory, adult learning, active learning, and creative learning. You can also explore books such as *The Creative Training Idea Book: Inspired Tips & Techniques for Engaging and Effective Learning* and *Creative Learning: Activities and Games That REALLY Engage Learners*.

One key thing that I have figured out related to helping others learn is to never forget that the learning event is ALL about your learners (learner-centric) and NOT about you. You can have all the knowledge and skills in the world, however, if you cannot effectively share what you know with others in a personable manner they will learn little from you. You should be the conduit to their learning, not the focus of it. How well you facilitate the sharing of knowledge and skills by getting learners actively engaged in the learning experience will determine the success level(s) of the event.

No matter what learning format or strategy that you adopt, an important factor to remember is that each learner is unique and has special interests, knowledge, experiences, and learning needs. Ideally, you will use some type of assessment before a session begins or at the beginning of it. Standard ways to accomplish this before an event include written questionnaires sent out in advance to gather information, one-on-one interviews with learners or those who know them well, focus groups, and performance reports available on each learner. In-class techniques include verbal questions asked with raised hand responses, flip charted questions to which learners respond, surveys, pre-tests, and crossword or word search puzzles that relate to key session terms or concepts. All of these techniques give you insight into current knowledge levels and needs. Once you have that information, you can focus on learner needs and engage individuals and groups throughout a session. You can also create your lesson plan or session guide that includes learning objectives and detailed strategies for facilitating each key concept.

Some of the techniques that are often useful in facilitating learning include the following. One thing to remember about these techniques, and any other strategy, is that since learning time is so precious (and usually limited), anything that you do in the classroom (e.g. stories, activities, information provided) must relate to the learning objectives. If you waste time with frivolous activities or events, learners will often turn off and start focusing on other things. They will also be less likely to return for future learning events

or to be open to engaging in them when they do. Additionally, if they are in the workplace and their supervisor or manager learns that the event was not productive or well structured, they will be less likely to support future learning events.

- *Icebreaker activities* in which learners network and associate in order to get to know one another while learning information that can be tied into session content.
- *Games or simulations* that are built around a session-related theme and that help facilitate understanding of key session concepts. Such games and simulation might be off-the-shelf board or card games that you modify to address session content or something that is created or customized specifically for your event.
- *Engagement activities* (individual and team) in which learners become physically involved in their learning. This can be done by getting them on their feet and moving about through activities in which balls, props, and other objects are incorporated while they practice skills, such as, interpersonal communication and teamwork. Background music might be added where appropriate to enhance the learning activity.
- *Problem-solving activities* in which learners are given a situation discuss or task to perform individually or as a team. Many skills can be addressed through such events (e.g. communication, change management, resource and time management, teamwork, coaching, and decision-making).
- *Memory/Recall activities* through which learner memory is accessed related to session topics and the importance of accessing and using previous experiences, knowledge and skills are emphasized.
- *Brainstorming, brain writing, and brain mapping activities* can be employed to help individuals and groups share creative ideas and generate solutions to issues and problems that have been identified by you or the group. You can research these techniques on the internet and in many publications related to problem solving and learning activities.

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