

## Getting the Most from Distant or Distracted Learners

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If you are a trainer or adult educator, there are many things to occupy the minds of your learner in today's world. They are bombarded with information, asked to "do more with less" in the workplace, have to contend with rising costs, downsizing, and a world filled with drugs, terrorists, and uncertain economics. Compound all of this with personal issues related to finance, health and family and it is no wonder that many participants show up for training and has trouble staying focused on the topic at hand.

Another potentially distracting element is that employees are often attending training because their supervisor required it. In many cases, the employee was not consulted before being registered for the training. Often this is done as a last effort before termination because the employee is not performing up to required standards. Considering these things it is easy to see how someone might not be motivated to focus on training or might have other things on his or her mind.

Generally, the following are several categories of distracters that can cause problems for learners and some strategies for potentially minimizing them.

- **Biases** are opinions or beliefs about a specific person, group, situation, or issue can sometimes cloud someone's inability to objectively listen to what is being said. These biases may result in preconceived and sometimes incorrect assumptions. They can also lead to communication and attention breakdown. In a learning environment, a participant may disagree with points being made, a facilitator, the venue, or any number of things that could distract from learning.

**Strategy** – Help raise awareness of personal values

If someone is distracted by others in the group, an issue or situation related to the training (e.g. someone perceives that you are giving favoritism or special treatment to others), you need to identify what is bothering the learner and try to remedy it. Depending on what their issue is you may want to address the fact that everyone is on equal ground in the class and all have the same opportunities to become involved. Also, that you encourage equal participation. If necessary, you may have to take a learner aside to counsel him or her if their actions or comments become distracting or disruptive. There is no room in training for prejudice or biases. Encourage everyone to be accepting and keep an open mind throughout training.

- **Psychological Distracters** – a participant's psychological state can impede effective learning and attention. If a participant is angry, upset or simply doesn't want to deal with a particular person or issue, their focus may be negatively affected.

**Strategy** - Identify and help diffuse emotion

Before someone can focus on learning, they need to get past their emotional roadblock. If you notice that someone seems to be distraught or emotionally distracted, take them aside during the break to ascertain what is causing the situation. Make sure that it is not something that you or other participants have done. If you determine it was caused by something in the session, take immediate action to remedy the situation and apologize to the learner. If the problem is caused by outside factors, suggest that if the learner cannot get past it and focus on the session, it might be best for them to go take care of what is bothering them and return for another session date. If appropriate, suggest that they speak with their supervisor if it is a work related situation or that they seek out help from the organizations Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if one exists.

- **Faulty assumptions** - based on past training experiences or encounters with other trainers or educators. For example, many people who have not attended school for years or did not go beyond high school in their education may rely only on their elementary and secondary school educational experiences (e.g. sitting in rows and having a teacher do all the work or talk “at” students. They may not realize that to be successful in a learning environment, they must become active participants and get involved in their own learning.

### **Strategy - Encourage Involvement**

Explain and demonstrate through your words and actions that learning will take place in an active format in your session. Plan activities throughout the program that engages and involves learners. Get them up, moving and continually involved in the learning process.

Build in games, interim reviews throughout the session, discussion and Brainstorming opportunities and many other strategies for learners to become and stay engaged.

- **Circadian Rhythm** - everyone has an internal “clock” cycle. This is the natural 24-hour biological pattern by which they function. This "clock" often identifies peak performance periods of the body.

Some people are said to be *morning people* whose best performance typically occurs early in the day. They often wake early, "hit the ground running," and continue until after lunch when the natural rhythm or energy level in their body begins to slow down. For such people afternoons are often a struggle. They may not do their best thinking and perform physically at peak during that point in the day.

*Evening people* often have just the opposite pattern of energy. They struggle to get up or perform in early morning; however, in afternoon and evening they are just hitting their stride. They often stay awake and work or play until the early hours of the next day when the morning people have been sound asleep for hours. From a listening standpoint, it is important to recognize your own natural body pattern so that you can

position your heaviest amount of important listening or productivity during your peak period if possible.

### **Strategy -Plan around peak periods**

Ideally, training will be planned when most participants are at their peak. By starting sessions at around 9 am and going until 1 or 2 pm, you catch the morning people and pick up the evening people halfway through a session. If you do an afternoon session, you are likely to lose the morning people halfway through the training unless it is very interactive.

- **Preoccupation** – caused by personal or other matters on a learner's mind (such as issues related to finance, school, marriage, family or personal/work projects). When such factors are present, it is sometimes difficult for learners to focus on training content and expectations. This can frustrate you, the participant and others in the classroom.

### **Strategy Counsel the learner**

While it is not your role as a trainer to counsel attendees, you must do something if a learner's attention and lack of participation is creating problems for others in the class. To do this, you might take the participant aside and try to ascertain if their inattention is related to you, the program or other participant's.

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