

Identifying Difficult Participants

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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.

Many factors come into play related to the ability to deal with participant behavior. Some of these factors include the following:

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

Difficult participant situations include learners such as those with poor attitudes (e.g. do not want to be there or think that they know it all), overzealous attitude (e.g. try to contribute too much or be too involved), people who speak English as a Second Language, and participants with a disabilities. Each type presents unique challenges and requires different knowledge and skills 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. Their 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. You become successful at training them and they learn.

The key to successfully managing and surviving difficult situations is to be flexible. In some situations listening is the key tool while in others a more autocratic, disciplinary approach is required. If you encounter the latter, 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.

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