

# DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PARTICIPANT SITUATIONS: YOUNGER LEARNERS

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Like any other generational group, younger learners (25 and younger) come with their own values and beliefs. If they are from another ethnic group or minority, they also bring cultural differences.

Sometimes referred to as the Gen Xers (1965-1976) and Y (1977-1995) generations, many younger learners come with their own generational values and beliefs. They are often categorized as selfish, unmotivated, and lacking goals, but this is not substantiated by research. Certainly, younger learners channel their energies differently from those before them, but this is not a bad thing. It simply means they are a product of their environment, the world as they know it, and they need and want to accomplish things important to them. This is no different from any generation in the past, and they should be valued for the views and ideas they bring to the learning environment.

## Strategies for Interacting with Gen-X Learners

### *Strategy#1 - Deliver Information in An Active Format*

Having grown up in a period when technology was coming into its own, many participants from this generation have short attention spans and need continuous stimulation. They are used to activity, playing video games, watching fast-paced movies, and hearing action-oriented commercials with tag lines, such as “when it absolutely positively must be there over night” and “just do it.” To address this need, build in spontaneity, action, and a variety of stimulating activities when designing programs. Make your delivery upbeat and involve learners. Use a variety of media also. Change the pace of the program and your delivery at least every seven or eight minutes to keep Gen-Xers focused and interested. Also, talk in short “sound bites” to keep their attention. An example of the latter would be to provide a short bit of information then immediately ask questions related to how they would apply the concepts, so that they stay involved and mentally focused.

### *Strategy#2 - Communicate “with” Learners*

Feeling in control and part of a process is important to many people from the Gen-X. To help address this need, regularly ask learners for input and feedback while providing them with feedback on their performance. Share information with them about the process, next steps, and the value of using what they are learning throughout the session, so that they have a feeling of being “in the loop.”

### *Strategy#3 - Make Learning Pertinent*

Show Gen-Xers that what they are being asked to learn is immediately useful to them personally. Provide real-life examples of how they might use the information or skills in their personal and professional lives and how they can gain from doing so. It is very helpful if you can get someone from this generation to offer an example of a time when they did or used

something related to the topic, and it added value. This helps validate information and concepts that you have presented.

### **Strategy#4 - Reduce Formality**

Gen-Xers often take an informal approach to life. To tap into their thinking, keep sessions less structured from the standpoint of rules, regulations, systems, formal name usage, and other such techniques that tend to make training more “stuffy” and rigid. The use of props, games, contests, activities, and other strategies that make learning fun is appreciated, helps reinforce your message, and ensures that learning takes place. Group activities relate directly to their core values, so use them to integrate participants into the learning.

## **Strategies for Interacting with Gen-Y Learners**

### **Strategy#1 - Challenge Learners**

As independent thinkers, many people from this generation like to look at options that are not consistent with mainstream thinking. They have learned through the use of technology that there are many possibilities in life, and they have seen phenomenal technical innovations (e.g., enhanced computer capabilities, special effects in movies, videogames that stretch the imagination and challenge abilities). To help capture and hold their interest, look for ways to incorporate innovation, technology, and problem-solving into your sessions. Use actions and words that challenge participants at every opportunity.

### **Strategy#2 - Respect Their Abilities**

One challenge faced by many seasoned trainers is that they sometimes fail to value the knowledge, skills, abilities, and ideas of those less experienced learners. This is a huge mistake. While all learners may not address issues and situations from the same perspective, they all have something to offer. When presenting information or detailing activities, provide the tools and guidelines for successful completion and leave the “how” to learners. If you do this, learners are likely to be more energized and involved, and everyone in the room, including you, can potentially learn something new. The last thing that should happen is for Y generation participants to feel undervalued or talked down to. They will likely resent and rebel as a result of such actions on your part.

### **Strategy#3 - Continually Seek and Give Feedback**

As with other learner groups, feedback is crucial for the successful outcome of any learning experience with many people from the Y generation. Build time into your program for reflection and feedback from learners. Get their ideas, reactions, opinions, and questions. Make sure you also ask for their feedback on format, content, effectiveness of delivery, and any other element that will allow you to make adjustments during the session. It is not effective for you to wait until the end of the session to share feedback with participants. Make this happen periodically throughout the training.

### **Strategy#4 - Make Learning Fun**

Learning does not have to be boring to be effective. As you create program content and materials, think of ways to make key points in an entertaining and stimulating manner. Use

props, color, music, activity, food, or whatever you can think of to engage as many of the five senses as possible. Use inoffensive humor to create an upbeat atmosphere, but remember that anything you do should tie directly into program content and learning points. Do not do something simply to make people laugh. Training time is too precious, and some people will be turned off by such activity. Still, do not take yourself too seriously. It is okay to take a light-hearted approach to most program content without losing your credibility or effectiveness.

### **Strategy#5 - Encourage Risk Taking**

Participants for the Y generation often accept and appreciate realism and often enjoy trying things that “are on the edge.” This likely explains the proliferation of the reality shows on television and the number of extreme sports that have emerged in the past decade. In your training, encourage people to take mental risks. Challenge them to think outside their paradigms and build in activities to teach them how to do so safely and within reason. Give them permission to break the rules and explore new ways of coming up with an answer and doing things.

**Source:** Lucas, R. W., *People Strategies for Trainers: 176 Tips and Techniques for Dealing With Difficult Classroom Situations*, AMACOM, New York, NY (2005)

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