

SETTING THE STAGE FOR LEARNING

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Many corporate trainers often forget a basic concept related to brain-based learning when preparing to conduct a session. They fail to recognize the value in preparing learners mentally for what they are about to experience. To do this, you can use the following as a checklist to ensure that you have done things to set the tone as learners walk into the room:

Define your roles and that of your learners early in the session so that everyone knows what to expect. You can do so by introducing a *Learning Contract* similar to the one I've provided at the end of this article. Put a copy on each participant's chair and discuss it as part of your introduction to the session. Add any additional roles that they offer.

Identify expectations through an icebreaker activity in which participants are given a 3X5 index card and asked to write down one expectation that they have of the session (e.g. content, delivery style, format, schedule or whatever they are interested in). Have them then form small groups, select a leader and scribe, list each expectation on a piece of flip chart paper, and then discuss how they can individually play a role in ensuring that each expectation is met. After 10-15 minutes, have the group leader present his or her group's list to other groups and share ideas for how they will assist the session's success.

Using the 3X5 approach can help get expectations from people who are either shy or who often do not share openly when simply asked, "What are your expectations?" It also helps get involvement early and prompts learners to take ownership for the success of the session.

Check your ego at the door. A difficult concept for some trainers and facilitator's to grasp is that they are not the center of attention or the purpose for participants attending a program. It is the message and the learning that results from their presence that is the crucial element of any program. You and all trainers are simply the catalyst or change agent for learning. Stress throughout your program – through words and actions, that the learner is the key element and that their input and opinion does matter.

Granted, some facilitators or trainers are more effective than others due to their "stage presence," style, communication ability, knowledge and experience. However, if you put on too good of a show by using too many bells, whistles and fancy equipment, you can actually distract and detract from message comprehension.

Determine participant needs by asking your learners what they want or need. This is one way of ensuring that you truly provide information and tools that add value for them.

Ideally, such information gathering should occur prior to the design of your program in order to incorporate material that is needed by participants. If this is not feasible, then obtain the information as quickly as possible before or at the beginning of a session.

Help learners take ownership for a program's content and recognize the value it can bring. To accomplish this, get participants involved early in a session by discussing session objectives by forming participants into small groups of 6-8 people. Select a leader and scribe for each group by giving a small game spinner to each group (get these from board games you own or at hobby, craft, or teacher supply stores. Have each person in a group take turns spinning until a pre-designated number, letter, color, or whatever is selected. That person "volunteers" to be the group leader. He or she can then turn to the person on the right or left and select the scribe, who will capture group ideas on a flip chart page. Next, to help identify needs and involve participants in an active learning process, pass out a handout which contains a single sentence question to prompt thinking about the course. You may want to use a variety of questions so that each small group works on different issues. Sample questions might be:

- At the end of this session, what new knowledge do you hope to have?
- Based on the session objectives, how do you see program content adding value to
- you, your customers and your organization?
- Why is this program topic important to you, your customers, and your organization?

Allow five to ten minutes for brainstorming and then have groups present ideas to the rest of their peers for discussion and comment.

Plan for a diverse audience. One training factor that cannot be ignored, if you want to successfully prepare for and influence the learning of others, is the diverse nature of today's learner population. Too many trainers and facilitators overlook this crucial element intentionally or through ignorance. In failing to prepare to address diverse needs, they ignore a major portion of their training audience.

Learn as much as you can about people, their beliefs, values and needs before trying to conduct training programs. Do not focus on the obvious, visible elements of race, color, ability, and gender. Instead, explore the subtle elements that make us all unique, yet similar. As with the various learning modalities, multiple intelligences and

other brain-based factors related to learning, the facets of diversity have just as big an impact on learning ability.

To help you, there are many advocacy groups, written materials, organizations, web sites and other resources that address various categories of people and their needs. Many of these offer helpful tips that you can incorporate into your programs. Still, do not lose sight of the fact that each learner is unique and has individual needs based on his or her own situation and preferences even though they are part of a larger diverse group. For this reason, the best way to determine participant needs is to ask them. You can do so by eliciting information (e.g. special learning and/or nutritional needs, language needs, or whatever) on course registration forms or through in-class activities in which people self-disclose information about themselves. If the latter approach is used, give participants a chance to opt out of public disclosure if they desire. Do not pressure or otherwise embarrass anyone.

Create a conducive learning environment. Brain researchers continue to discover the importance of environmental factors on the human brain. To capitalize on their findings, you can design your learning environments in a manner where participants have maximum access to information. You should also plan activities in which they can best use their five senses to receive and process information. Your training environment should compliment subject matter as closely as possible. To accomplish this, consider the audience, organizational culture, subject matter and expected outcomes for the training. With these factors in mind, set out to create a learning utopia in which all the elements of brain-based learning are addressed to your fullest capability. Even if you have only indirect control over the room (e.g. a hotel or conference room) in which training will take place, you can still incorporate many of the ideas outlined in material on brain-based and active learning.

Build innovation into your training. The wonderful thing about being a creative trainer is that through a little innovation, you can procure and use a variety of inexpensive tools to compliment your training. You can also reconfigure seating and in some cases, lighting, to better accommodate participants and learning needs. Often, for only a small amount of time and money (less the \$50 dollars), you can obtain decorations, materials and props that will add pizzazz to your classroom. In doing so, you will be helping to better attract and hold attention while relaying your thoughts and ideas to learners.

The key to enhancing and enriching your training vestibule is to add variety and novelty while fully engaging learners. Your goal should be to entice, challenge, raise emotion and stimulate their brains to a point where transfer of training to the workplace is a natural outcome.

The following are websites that you might want to explore in order to get additional creative training ideas and find products that you can incorporate into your sessions..

Mindware www.mindwareonline.com

The Trainer's Warehouse www.trainerswarehouse.com

U.,S. Toy Company www.ustoy.com

Oriental Trading Company www.orientaltraining.com

Rhode Island Novelty www.rinovelty.com

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TRAINING AGREEMENT

Please consider this program a "safe" environment --- What we say here, stays here.

It's alright to...

- *Express your ideas.*
- *Challenge the facilitator's ideas.*
- *Offer examples (please keep them generic with no names used).*
- *Question.*
- *Relax.*

Your Role...

- *Be on time (from breaks and lunch).*
- *Participate.*
- *Learn in your own way.*
- *Provide honest, open feedback on evaluations.*
- *Enjoy yourself!*

Facilitator's Role...

- *Start and end on time.*
- *Professionally facilitate the exchange of information and knowledge.*
- *Allow time for and encourage your input.*
- *Listen non-defensively.*
- *Help you grow personally and professionally.*

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