

Engaging Training Participants

Research shows that the more closely the subject matter is related to a participant's job, the higher the levels of engagement, retention, and post-classroom application. **BY MICHAEL ROSENTHAL**



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Q Prior to transitioning from working in a business unit to a talent development function, I would enroll in classes with titles that promised to be interesting and enriching. However, once I was in the classroom, my mind would wander, and I would count the minutes until it was over. How do I ensure that participants pay attention during the programs I line up for them?

A: We've all felt trapped in a classroom, feeling that we're wasting our time just being there.

This usually happens when we feel we're not learning anything that would have a positive impact on our life. We question the source, the validity of the presentation, and whether it's applicable to our situations.

As someone in talent development, here are three things you can do to avoid this from happening in your sessions and to increase participant engagement:

1. Whenever possible, use subject matter experts. This is especially important when addressing senior audiences. Professionals acquire all types of skills through "real-life" experiences, both inside and outside of work. And when someone feels they know as much as the presenter, they become skeptical of the material. Similarly, if the facilitator can't answer participants' complex questions to their satisfaction, they tune out. Thus, a facilitator should have in-depth subject matter experience, with a history of successfully applying the concepts in the workplace (and not merely teaching them).

For example, one reason clients engage our firm to improve their negotiation skills is because of our field experience negotiating business deals and hostage situations, as well as consulting to heads of state and resolving deadly conflicts. Not only does our experience provide credibility and prevent skepticism about whether our methodologies are practical for "the real world," but it allows us to delve as deeply into the topic as an audience requires, with no question being out of

bounds or too difficult to handle.

2. Adopt curricula that use exercises to drive the learning. While slideshows and organized presentations have their place, adults learn and remember through experience. So try to use a mixture of exercises that, on the one hand, draw people out of their work contexts, and, on the other hand, reflect the work they do on a daily basis.

The former helps participants focus their attention on the theories and skills you are imparting, while the latter helps them see the relevance to their everyday lives—when they understand how the training will help them, it further helps them focus their attention and their memory.

3. Customize each curriculum to meet the unique aspects, challenges, and goals of the particular audience. While many companies do a great job of creating syllabi that target objectives on an organizational level (i.e., Negotiation Skills for GenericCo Employees), they fail to take a more granular approach, and offer different syllabi to meet the different needs of individual audiences.

Research shows that the more closely the subject matter is related to a participant's job, the higher the levels of engagement, retention, and post-classroom application. Accordingly, you should try to create a different syllabus for each audience (i.e., Negotiation Skills for GenericCo Junior Salespeople, Negotiation Skills for GenericCo Mid-Level Operations Professionals, Negotiation Skills for GenericCo Senior Accountants, etc.).

At the same time, try to incorporate uniformity among all of the related offerings, especially with regard to frameworks and cultural aspects. For example, all GenericCo negotiation offerings use the "Consensus Framework" and/or all GenericCo negotiation workshops promote the idea of putting the other party's needs on par with our own. This creates a company-wide approach, and avoids fractioning within the organization and confusion among individual contributors, especially when they move from one function to another. **T**