challenges facing new trainers

Using examples from clients and personal experience, Steve Shellabear explores some of the challenges that new trainers face when working with clients and delegates and provides practical advice on how to work with them.

Much has been written on training the trainer. A visit to the local library or bookshop reveals a myriad of differing and overlapping methodologies, models and techniques. These range from the instructional to the experiential, making finding relevant material often a confusing and daunting task for those new to the profession.

When I began training in the corporate sector seven years ago, I was fortunate in that I was provided with valuable theoretical and interpersonal input.

Much of my training was in the humanistic tradition which informs my thinking now. I gained firm footholds that helped me on my journey to develop personally and become a trainer and consultant. Having reflected on and critically evaluated my own and many clients' training experiences, I've noticed that there are parallels in the issues and challenges trainers encounter in working with organisations, groups and individuals. Whilst circumstances and personalities are different, recurring issues and processes are often similar.

So, here is an introduction to some of the training principles and guidelines I found useful. I offer them not as definitive list, nor as a definitive coverage of each subject, as may of the ideas have implications outside of the scope of an article of this length. Nor are they a substitute for your own experience but as items that may stimulate thinking, which I hope will be helpful to you in your practice.

To support that process, I invite you to read and imagine you are dealing with the issues given in the examples below. How would you respond? Some of these issues you may have already come to grips with, others may be new. You may like to take pen and paper and jot down what you think are the key challenges for each issue, before reading my analysis.

issues

example 1

The company you work for is growing rapidly. As a new trainer you've been given ambitious training objectives to achieve. (A lot of people in a short timeframe, to a relatively high level of skill.) You know you're on a steep learning curve yourself in

delivering this material and so does your manager. However, a directive has been given that this training programme must go ahead in order for the company to meet its commercial objectives, even if the training team is under-resourced and the trainers are inexperienced. Your manager is under pressure, which is being passed down-line to you.

example 2

You've started working with a new client. They want you to assist them in identifying their training needs, set objectives and design and deliver a programme to meet them. You refer to the training cycle(1) as a template to guide you. They already have a method of validation and evaluation that they want to use. As you work with them, you notice that you feel uneasy. All of your suggestions are met with "We do that already" or "I know that". You feel frustrated that your contribution is unrecognised and that you can't add the value you want.

example 3

You are delivering a training course with a colleague to a large group of staff inhouse. The group know each other and you, though this is the first time you've trained them. Your colleague, the more experienced trainer, is leading the group, and has built a rapport with them. As you go up to the front of the room to take your session, you notice that you feel apprehensive, concerned about your own performance and how people will respond. The group seems unusually silent, which makes you feel more tense. Your stomach feels tight.

example 4

You've been asked to deliver a training course. When you arrive to run it you find that none of the delegates have been briefed properly by their manager and don't know why they are there. Resentment is expressed towards you about "wasting people's time" and "being sent on yet another course". You feel annoyed that your instructions for briefing have not been carried out and that you now have to deal with this situation.

challenges

analysis: example 1

This is a complex and unfortunately not uncommon situation. The company is obviously being viewed in a fairly mechanistic way by senior management whose attention is focussed on the commercial priorities, discounting individual needs. Viewing the organisation as a machine has in itself weaknesses that tend to breed passivity and dependence in staff, which both organisation and individuals losing out from lack of innovation and personal development.(2) This, combined with expediency to 'get the objective whatever the cost', is a recipe for disaster. Assuming that the training programme is set up to contribute to an organisational objective (and if it's not why is it

being run?), implementing it without resourcing the training team adequately will be to the company's detriment, as both internal and external customers suffer. Your challenge is to raise your manager's awareness of these issues and attempt to quantify what the consequences of the proposed actions will be. The more 'hard nosed' you can be in assessing the implications to profits and customer retention, the better.

analysis: example 2

The challenge here is to recognise that you are receiving mixed messages. On the rational level you are working with them, at a deeper unconscious level you feel blocked. This is client resistance, which is a common element of the learning process. Whilst it may not always occur, when it does it may take many forms. The example here indicates a desire of wanting to stay in control.(3) Many new trainers and consultants react negatively to resistance, rather than seeing it as a natural process, seeking to honour the need it serves for the client. Understood, resistance offers a unique opportunity to release anxieties and unlock learning. Reacted to, it generates psychological games as compulsive as the best soaps on TV. One common dynamic is where players alternatively take turns to act out roles of Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim with each other.(4)Whilst the inevitable dramas may be entertaining to watch at home from the safety of the armchair, their unconscious use is not recommended as a training or consultancy method.

analysis: example 3

In working with large groups, emotional energy and fantasy run at such a high level it's a challenge to 'think straight'. Much insight, personal and social learning can be gained by the trainer and the group if they are conscious and engage with the energies rather than attempt to sidestep them.(5) To do this, trainers require an awareness of themselves, their own biases, their concerns (which they are able to bracket off) and their potential as catalysts for change. In this example, the large group size and its familiarity is likely to stimulate behaviour about needing to 'Be Perfect', 'Please People', 'Try Hard', 'Be Strong' and 'Hurry Up'.(6) Whilst these working styles do have advantages as well as disadvantages, the competitiveness between the training team and the over concern with individual performances is likely to generate more negatives. Unless this is addressed, the trainer is likely to experience a self fulfiling prophecy, where s/he creates the very thing most feared happening. For the trainer, the challenge is to accept her/his own thoughts and feelings and create an authentic relationship with their co-trainer and the group. Open communication is the key tool here.

analysis: example 4

Most trainers have experienced this scenario at some point in their careers. Poor briefing of delegates may be caused by a number of factors. Perhaps the client had other priorities and was too busy. Maybe they were unable to communicate effectively with their staff due to over familiarity, lack of authority or hidden agendas. Many managers 'subcontract' the briefing element of a training programme to the trainer, believing that simply sending joining instructions will suffice. In my experience this is rarely the case. Unless delegates

have considered personal objectives for participating prior to attending, their participation will be diminished. In this example, the trainer will have extra work to do to create suitable learning conditions. This would need to be addressed before any skills or know-how of a technical nature was imparted. I've often found that when delegates express considerable resentment in an instance like this it is symptomatic of a poor relationship with management elsewhere.

guidelines for success

As a result of encountering situations like these, I developed my own guidelines for success, validated by projects that worked and refined by those that didn't. They are listed below.

developing self and group awareness

Knowing thyself', through what is generally known as personal development, is an age-old prerequisite for most spiritual and humanistic disciplines. Certainly, the ability to use self-reference, using one's thoughts and feelings as a guide for working with delegates is essential for the skilled trainer. As an extension of this, they also require an appreciation of the experiential levels of group reality, understanding conscious and semi-conscious elements such as:

Social - where the group is experienced as representing the community.

Transference - where the group is experienced as a family and the trainer may be viewed as a parent figure or family member.

Projective - where unrecognised or unowned parts of the self are reflected onto others or the group. Here the trainer may be idealised as 'the knight in shining armour' or experienced as the Persecutor.

Transpersonal - where the group represents the collective unconscious and symbolic rituals, magical rebirths, rites of passage and initiation may be enacted.(7)

Many trainers have an intuitive grasp of these in order to function effectively in their role. However, less common is an understanding and use of these models as part of a methodology that has been reflected upon and critically evaluated. Doing so informs your practice and is relevant across a broad range of training programmes.

build emotional competence

John Grindler, one of the founders of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), is quoted as having said "the most important thing a trainer can pay attention to is your own state and after that is the state of your audience."(8) Using your energy and attention to make the maximum contribution is very satisfying. It is also a primary skill for a trainer.

'Emotional competence' has recently enjoyed a revival of interest and many books are now available on it. As it's a capacity that's developed through direct experience, I suggest you read enough to understand it and then enroll in a suitable training programme to further develop your own.

stay curious

Many would argue that unless you experience yourself as growing through learning from each person you interact with, you have no right to expect others to learn from you. Certainly your work will eventually become lack-lustre and inspire nobody, least of all yourself, if you lose the sense of satisfaction and enjoyment that attracted you to training initially. Many trainers reach a level of skill or development and then 'sit back on their laurels', feeling they've done sufficient flying hours to consider themselves qualified, and so have no need to learn. It may be tempting to keep 'churning out' your old material, particularly if you have become skilled in its delivery, but be aware of the personal and professional costs. Do you really want to be the consultancy equivalent of a 'one hit wonder' singer who had a hit single in the sixties and then did nothing original afterwards? Improving your imaginative capacity through thinking and trying different methods will increase your creativity, will, memory and thinking. It will also keep you open to energies that will re-energise you and unfold meaning in your life.(9)

address issues as they arise

Do not hesitate to deal with activities or arrangements that violate the values that have been contracted with your group at the beginning of the programme. Many new trainers or consultants try to placate the group/client and end up compromising themselves and undermining the objectives they have been commissioned to serve. This can be because they find some matters too sensitive to discuss or fear losing approval. Self-defence is the cause of reluctance to challenge. Feeling uncomfortable and not being sure of how to do it well are cited as the main reasons for non intervention(10). However, if the ground rules are negotiated and agreed up front with your client/group, the psychological, professional and administrative issues can be dealt with effectively as they arise. Giving and receiving feedback provides both a context and method for direct communication that both client and trainer benefit from. Having said that, I fully acknowledge how much skill is required to challenge in a supportive manner and maintain rapport. Training and coaching can help here.

assume positive intention

Acting 'as if' your client has a positive intention, when indicators suggest the opposite, can be an effective method for enabling both you and them to re-frame the situation to achieve a positive outcome rather than getting caught up in a series of negative reactions. The important element here is to remember your positive intention in wanting to create co-operation rather than manipulation. This process is drawn from NLP, and can equally

be applied to yourself to help you change unwanted conflicts and unproductive behaviours(11).

develop your communication skills

Your communication is the key to helping your client make the changes that they desire. As human beings we are communicating all the time with each other, whether or not we are conscious of it. Our facial expressions, body posture and the way we say what we say all convey subtle and not so subtle messages. As a professional communicator, the importance of honing your skills in these areas cannot be overstated. Active listening, questioning skills, creating rapport and managing your impact are just some of the more obvious areas that you'll need to develop. Much has been written on these topics and may lead you to believe you've heard it all before. I've observed that for even the 'old lags' of the training world, revisiting this area can be beneficial.

support systems

For many trainers and consultants who've gone freelance and set up on their own, building a suitable support group is particularly important. Training and consultancy can be physically, emotionally and intellectually draining, as well as rewarding. I believe we all need an environment where we can relax with peers, unpack and make sense of the experiences we've had 'on the road'. This means sharing, giving and receiving feedback, discussing challenges and celebrating our 'wins'. Even for those of us who work in a company where we have our own ready-made 'community' available, there may still be a need to build a system that supports us. Recognising and communicating our own needs is an important element in serving our clients. 'Shadow consulting', where one member of a training/consultancy team pairs up with another, not involved in the client system, to regularly debrief and provide an objective view of both interventions and a health/reality check, can also be an invaluable asset. To take advantage of such a system requires openness and co-operation on the part of facilitator and trainer/consultant.

This mode of operating works best in an organisational culture that supports mutuality, where stakeholders' interests are looked after, rather than subordination of personal needs to corporate objectives/tasks.(12)

critically evaluate your performance

In our western business culture where pragmatic action is generally valued over theorising and self-reflection, it's easy to become swept along in a corporate whirlwind of deadlines and activities. Whilst these are important, equally important is the need to reflect and evaluate one's actions if we are not to continue to keep repeating the same mistakes.
Making time to reflect and critically evaluate your performance is an essential element of the learning cycle and 'best practice' for all professionals. My advice is to honour yourself and your own process and ensure you build this into your schedule.

conclusion

I've written much and am aware that much more could be written on all these subjects. An underlying theme that permeates the article is the trainers' stance in relationship to their clients. I'd like to conclude on this, with a quote from Reshad Feild (13).

'Service is the key to Truth, for Truth lives in service.
Yoke yourself to the wheel of service, and the universe will turn around you.'

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