EIGHT TRAINING PROBLEMS....AND SOME SOLUTIONS
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(Reprinted from the March, 1986, issue of <u>The Developer</u>)

Staff developers face some predictable problems when making oral presentations to groups. In this article eight typical problems are discussed and suggestions are made for both preventing them and for solving them when they do occur.

"Over-the-Podium Diagnosis"

In the course of training, participants frequently present a specific problem for which they want a solution. It is often impossible, however, to find out enough about the problem and the previously attempted interventions to actually provide helpful suggestions. In addition, not everyone is interested in the problem this one participant is experiencing. Yet the trainer needs to be sure that the person who raised the problem does not feel put down or that his or her problem is not worthwhile.

Prevention
* Announce before the training begins that there will be a specified amount of time at the end of the session for problem solving.

* List your phone number or address on the board or distribute your business card. Suggest that, someone has an individual concern, you can be reached at your office.

Solutions

* Suggest that the participant see you at another time (during a break, at lunch, etc.) when you can talk one-to-one. Be sure to affirm your concern for the individual.

* Refer the participant to someone else for help.

* Ask the participant to wait until the end of the training as the answer may be forthcoming in the presentation.

"Wandering Off the Topic"

While discussion is important and should be encouraged, at times participants will have their own agendas and get off track. When this happens the person who has moved the topic off the subject needs to know that, while you respect his or her concern, you must keep to the agenda.

Prevention
* Be well prepared at the beginning of a session. An overview will assist participants in defining the topic by focusing them on the content.

*. If small group discussions are used, the trainer can select group leaders to help keep the group on task.

* Announce at the beginning of the session that there will be time for group discussion at the end. During that time, topics that still need to be covered can be brought up and/or plans made to cover them in future sessions.
Solutions
* Say, "Were wandering off the topic now and need to refocus ourselves."

* Schedule 10-20 minutes or discussion at the end of the session. During the presentation, you find the group wandering off the topic, remind them about the discussion time reserved at the end. Then jot down the point so you won't forget to get back to it.

* Interject leading questions that refocus on the topic at hand.

* Prepare a question box (e.g., Dear Abby) into which participants can submit questions for off -task topics. Allow time for these to be answered at the end of the session.

"Being An Oracle"

Although you are well aware that you do not have all the answers, your audience may assume that you do. Because such an assumption can lead to disillusionment on the part of participants and discouragement on yours, it is important that you let the group know from the beginning that you do not have all the answers.

Prevention
* Tell participants that you are not an oracle but are willing to try to find answers to their questions or put them in touch with an appropriate person.

* Suggest that there is a lot of expertise that can be tapped right in the room.

Solutions
* Throw the question back to the person or group in terms of what they think, know, or have attempted. Ask participants if they have answers or suggestions.

* Suggest a reference book, article, or person for the participant to use as a follow-up

"Losing Track"

It can be disconcerting to the trainer to lose his or her train of thought or place in the presentation.

Prevention
* To avoid losing your place in your notes, you can have a pencil hand and put a check next to where you stop.

* During the discussions you can jot down your last point so you'll remember where you left off.

* A paper clip can be attached to the paper at the spot where you leave off for a discussion or a story.

* A good outline, readily visible on the overhead or chalkboard, also helps in getting back on track.

* Rehearsing can help because the presentation has been practiced once already.
Solutions
* You can be honest and say, "I've lost it. Can someone help me out?"

* Ask participants, "What was the last thing I just said?" prompting them to play back where you left off in the presentation.

* Ask participants what they think about what you just said. This allows the trainer to remember the point being made.

* Say, "Everyone, I need a two-minute-break - let's take a stretch," or " Turn to the person beside you and tell them the most interesting thing you've learned so far today." In either case you have time to get yourself together.

<center>**"Premature Closure"**</center>

Discussions relevant to the topic are very worthwhile. Trainers may, however, become nervous about how much time they have to complete a session and cut off meaningful discussion. It is important that the participant's interest is acknowledged as valid and worthwhile.

Prevention
* Refrain from asking leading questions toward the end of a session.

* Schedule discussions early in a session so that you can adjust your speed accordingly.
* Provide an agenda on a transparency or handout so that participants can judge how much time
  is available for discussion.

* Have participants send in questions relevant to the topic of the session ahead of time. This allows you to include information and relevant activities in the session.

Solutions
* Provide an opportunity for discussion at the end of a session. Tell participants that, if there is, discussion will resume later, but at the moment, it is necessary to push forward.

* Flexibility can be built into presentations so that, when relevant discussion arises, time can be devoted to it right on the spot.

<center>**"Hooked on a 'Yes, But'"**</center>

Some participants will tell you that the solution you propose won't work. They may say, "Yes, that's one idea, but it doesn't work for my problem." If you are hooked, you give another example and evoke the same "Yes, but," response. This might go on for several potential solutions until you get frustrated.

Prevention
* Turn the problem over to the audience and see what they have tried.
* Do not offer suggestions out of your own field of expertise. It is hard to defend your opinion if you do. It is better to honestly say you don't know something than to be caught faking. Remember, you're not an oracle.

* It's always better to have a second or third trainer who has a different area of expertise. This allows the trainers to monitor one another, thereby avoiding this trap.

* Use brainstorming rules where no one is allowed to criticize any suggestion.

Solutions
* Simply ask the participant what he or she has tried. Often the person only wants confirmation that his or her interventions are valid. When the participant tells you a technique he or she has used say, "That's a good one," and move on to something else.

* If you find yourself becoming frustrated, stop and identify the trap in your mind, then tell the participant that you will tell him or her later the name of a good book, person, article, etc., which should help in solving the problem.

<center>**"Out-of-Control Participants"**</center>

There is a fine line between participants being outright rude and those enjoying the session so much that they want to share something with a neighbor. If they are blatantly "acting out," however, it is your responsibility to take control of the situation. If you don't, other interested participants can be distracted and lose their enthusiasm.

Prevention
* Plan sessions so that participants play an active role.

* If some participants know the information, have them help in the planning and presentation.

* Schedule breaks and let the participants know from the beginning the break times. In this way they will know when they'll have the opportunity to move around and talk.

* Use a variety of media so that the participants do not become bored with too much of the same thing.

* Have several surprise activities that can be pulled out at any point when there is a lull or a problem with attention. Have plans for getting participants moving and talking.

* Administer a pretest to have participants determine whether they really know the content. Frequently they "misbehave," arguing that they already know the material. Having the pretest data available may head off problems.

Solutions
* Pick out ringleaders and involve them in the training by directing questions to them or by giving them handouts to distribute.

* Talk to those individuals during breaks and try to establish a rapport by acknowledging the problem, saying something like, "I get the idea you're not too happy to be here."

* As a follow-up to the previous question, be frank and ask the person what his or her objectives are, giving them a chance to air their feelings. It is more important that you not become defensive, but, rather, listen to and reflect their feelings. You may learn a lot about where they are coming from and be able to make adjustments in your presentation.

* Kid them by saying, "I've had some kids like you in my classroom."

* Have participants find a seat next to someone they have not already sat next to as a way of breaking up negative cliques

* Sometimes you just want to get everyone's attention after a small group activity. You can do this by using a prearranged signal such as ringing a bell, playing a cut of music, or flipping a light switch on and off.

* Assign an attention-seeking individual to assume the role of the recorder.

* Move near the trouble-making participants and establish eye contact.

<center>**"Brick Wall"**</center>

Out there in that sea of faces there will undoubtedly be some who will not respond. Trying to change or have an impact on a brick wall is definitely a trap to be avoided. It will lead to frustration and wasted energy, similar to beating a dead horse.

Prevention
* Keep the problem in perspective. Remember that 10% or less of any population is usually negative.

* Be non-judgemental and respect the views of unresponsive individuals.

Solutions
* Avoid making eye contact with brick walls. They can make a trainer feel less affirmed and more frustrated.

* Let the brick wall give examples or criticism and then simply move on to the next participant or go back to your presentation.

* Avoid preaching or arguing. Instead say, "You may be right," or "I see your point."