

Preparing for the best - Smoothing the layer of group process



Everyone who has ever been involved in training groups of people will know that there are times when they don't always get the enthusiastic, ready-to-go participants that they expect. Indeed, there are times when participants don't always get the kind of trainer for whom they had hoped. There are probably as many suggestions and techniques to overcome these difficulties as there are trainers or participants. A search on the web or a trawl through the local library will cover topics such as group processes, preparation, structures, ice-breakers, programme development and energisers.

In my experience, there are two fundamental and interconnected elements of training – engaging participants and evidencing the learning. Sometimes ripples of disturbance can appear within these elements. When this happens, it necessary to peel back all the layers in order to discover and smooth areas of difficulty.

Layer 1 – The Buy-in

This is three quarters strategic management – the people who commissioned the training may well believe in and have approved of the programme. However, how much have they ensured that their positive views have been conveyed and modeled to their staff? Can the support be measured in terms of financial and time resources for staff to attend and apply the training?

Operational management –

Team managers -- how much do the team managers support the process by providing work-relief for participants attending the training? What provision is made for newly trained staff to be mentored and supported following training? Do managers speak positively of the training? How interested are they in feedback about the participant?

Participants – how much responsibility have participants taken to prepare for the course? For instance reading the pre-course material, preparing work/home for their absence.

Trainers – has the trainer read the material and considered ways to convey it in a way that is interesting, including using relevant examples? Does the trainer generally believe in the material they are planning to deliver? If not, what steps have they taken to ensure that they can deliver the key course concepts/goals so that participants, and their organisation, get maximum benefit? How will the trainer measure learning

“Working with passion and integrity to bring out the best in people”



Preparing for the best - Smoothing the layer of group process

and then convey that back to participants and relevant people within the organisation? What time has the trainer allowed to review participant learning (and their own) following the training?

(Note: The layers are not exclusive. Elements of course structure have been omitted. However, I have attempted to identify those layers where I believe “ripples of disturbance” can occur. I have used the term “workplace”. However, some courses may be for participants who are addressing elements of their personal life).

Layer 2 – Welcoming participants

Get to know participants –have they worked/trained together before? What issues might arise during the training? Are there any cultural protocols to observe?

Send an introductory email – they are busy people, keep it brief. Attachments should be reserved for non-essential information and might include a broader profile of your organisation. In your email, introduce yourself, welcome them to the forthcoming course, advise them of any pre-course activities they need to carry out, give them an overview of the material and ask them to prepare some goals/targets. Ask if they have particular dietary or accessibility needs.

Amenities – ensure tea/coffee etc is available on arrival. Be deliberate about the lay-out and presentation of the room.

On arrival – greet each person individually and introduce yourself. How was the travel, accommodation? What is the mood of the group? How will it impact upon the course? What is the group culture?

Layer 3 – Opening the loop

A variety of ways to build curiosity – Place key words, diagrams or pictures around the room. Expand upon them during the training in a way that participants can make the connection. Alternatively, ask participants to listen to what you will be saying. How might they apply key points of your presentation?



“Working with passion and integrity to bring out the best in people”



Preparing for the best - Smoothing the layer of group process

Learning needs – from the outset, are you matching your style to that of the Participants? Don't be too prescriptive, as long as the key concepts are delivered and understood.

Energisers and ice-breakers – different ones suit different individuals, depending on learning needs. Be purposeful. Do you want to build energy, trust, focus, learning or for a break between topics? Low participation in interactive games can mean a lack of trust between group members. At the end of the training, quizzes and games can be fun, but make them meaningful. Allocate different session topics to an individual/ subgroup. They have to prepare and then present a brief description of what the topic covers, describing its key elements and then give a specific example of how they are going to use it in the workplace.

Layer 4 – Setting the stage

Acknowledge individual situations – what have Participants had to put in place at work/home in order to attend the training? How might these impact upon the training?

Layer 5 – Starting off

The confident group – how much do they already know? Will this be a barrier to engagement? Does this need to be addressed before proceeding? Ask participants if they think they might switch off from or disrupt the rest of the group.

The nervous/despondent/reluctant group – what was the previous training experience like? What has worked in the past? What would they like to have seen more? Focus on what works, rather than what does not.

The frustrated group – are participants indicating a negative mood from the outset? Is this about the trainers, training, or something else? Whilst not focusing too much time on the finer detail, it is important to identify and acknowledge frustrations. However, it remains the group's responsibility to address them outside the training environment rather than let them interfere. What will the participants do to remain focused?



“Working with passion and integrity to bring out the best in people”



Preparing for the best - Smoothing the layer of group process



The disconnected group – what is the relationship between participants? Trainers will not always be aware of the cause of tensions. However, socialising with participants during break times can be enlightening. Have you talked with your co-trainer? Do you need to talk with particular participants? Who else do you need to inform (managers, support services)? Have you recorded your decision making?

Remember – every participant and trainer has a choice about whether they want to remain in the group.

Layer 6 – Tracking the Learning

Establishing a baseline – what are the key skill/knowledge areas to be addressed in the training? How do they score their current capabilities? Invite participants to pair up with someone with whom they can be honest. Check their scores with their pair and record it. Ask each person to publicise their strengths and areas for development to the main group. (Goals could also be created out of this exercise).

Regular reviews – E.g. “tell me what you will be considering when you review risk with your next client”. What specific examples can participants provide about how they are going to apply their learning?

Skills practice – what have participants identified as areas of strength/ development? What has the observer noticed in relation to these and other factors? Has the observer or participant noted this down in the participant’s work book? At the end of the session/day, what does this mean for participants?

[**Note:** Sometimes, trainers refer to some groups as “resistant”. However, I have chosen not to use this term as it can often lead to labeling and, consequently negative self-talk and self-fulfilling prophecies].

Layer 7 – Trainer differences

Respect your co-trainer – are you modelling what you expect from participants? Your colleague’s different perspective from yours does not mean they cannot do their job. It is generally the case that just as your style matches

“Working with passion and integrity to bring out the best in people”



Preparing for the best - Smoothing the layer of group process

some participants more than others, so does the style of your colleague.

We continue to grow – is there something about your own style that could be further enhanced?

Layer 8 – Evaluation

Be open and honest – have you invited feedback about the content and your delivery of the course? Have you provided constructive feedback to participants and their managers about their own participation and learning?

Acknowledging and clarifying the skills of the Confident Group

1. In sequence, select a third of the group (A) who consider themselves to be the most confident, then a third (B) who are the least confident, the remaining third (C) can be a mixture.

(A) and (C)'s task is to prepare and present what they believe should be the core elements of the course. However, (A) also needs to be able to provide examples for each of the elements.

In the meantime, (B)'s task is to identify what they want to get from the course. The three groups then reconvene with (A) doing their presentation whilst (B) and (C) listen. (B) then comments on the extent to which (A) has increased their understanding of what is to be covered in the course.

Finally, (C) summarises both (A) and (B)'s presentations, adding anything they think was missing.

Trainers should thank all participants and then link the groups' presentations to the material that is actually to be covered in the course: it is hoped that it is substantially more than what was covered in (A) and (C)'s presentations. However, this is not about point-scoring for the trainers. It is about acknowledging what is known. It should also help to give trainers a clear idea of what to focus on for the rest of the course.



“Working with passion and integrity to bring out the best in people”



Preparing for the best - Smoothing the layer of group process

2. Alternatively, again using subgroups, invite participants to write their understanding of the key concepts on a piece of flipchart paper. With each subgroup leaving their paper, rotate the groups round to add to/expand upon the previous group. Once all the subgroups have fully rotated, invite discussion on what has been written/missed out.

Sam Farmer is a forensic psychologist working as part of the HMA team. For more information about how HMA can help you with your training needs contact info@hma.co.nz



"Working with passion and integrity to bring out the best in people"



Phone: (643) 328-7082 Fax: (643) 328-7089
PO Box 188, Lyttelton 8841, New Zealand, www.hma.co.nz