

## **Making the Best Out of Opportunities to Teach: Seven Key Principles**

How can we make the most of our training opportunities? This and other safety periodicals have covered this topic on more than one occasion (for example, see my *ISHN* columns in Sept., Nov., and Dec. of 1999). At the risk of being redundant with earlier articles on training, I'd like to explain seven research-based principles you need to consider when given the opportunity to teach, whether one-on-one or in a group setting.

### **Principle 1: Explain Why**

In an earlier *ISHN* article (Nov. 1996), I discussed a distinction between education and training. Education targets thinking or thought processes and usually includes the theory or rationale behind a particular lesson. In contrast, training targets behavior, and includes steps to assure the learner knows what to do to satisfy certain performance criteria.

With this first principle, I'm saying that effective training should include education. The entire learning process is facilitated when people realize up-front the potential benefits to be gained from their learning. Tell people what positive consequences they could gain and/or negative consequences they could avoid from a training program, and they will be more motivated to learn.

### **Principle 2: Specify Learning Objectives**

It's critical to clarify what the learner will be able to **do** as a result of the training session. The focus here is on behavior, not understanding or thinking.

Explain the relevance of the behavior for obtaining the benefits outlined in Principle 1.

State the objectives from the perspective of the learner. For example, “You will be able to complete a behavioral checklist” rather than “I will show you how to complete a behavioral checklist.” And, state the learning objectives in behavioral terms. For example, “You will be able to conduct the four essential steps of a behavior-based coaching session” rather than “You will understand how to implement a behavioral coaching process”.

### **Principle 3: Provide Memory Aids**

“Every good boy does fine.” “M Ven J Sun P.” “Roy G BIV.” Are any of these phrases familiar? They are mnemonics or memory aids I once used to remember respectively the five music notes in the treble clef, the nine planets of our solar system (in order from the sun), and the seven colors of a rainbow (ordered from shortest to longest wavelength).

My point is that learning can be enhanced with a memory aid. My colleagues and I use acronyms, another type of memory aid, to facilitate behavior-based safety (BBS) training. For example, we use “DO IT” to teach the four steps of a BBS process (*define* critical behaviors, *observe* these behaviors, *intervene* to influence these behaviors, and then *test* for intervention impact). We also use the letters of COACH to review the consecutive steps of a behavioral coaching process – **C**are, **O**bserve, **A**nalyze, **C**ommunicate, and **H**elp.

### **Principle 4: Inspire Action and Reaction**

In an earlier *ISHN* article (September 1999), I discussed the difference between mindless and mindful learning. Mindful learning is active learning. This doesn't mean you need to get up and do jumping jacks, or even interact verbally with others in the training session. The beneficial activity of mindful learning can be entirely in the learner's head. This is referred to as covert responding as opposed to overt or outward responding. Research has shown that learning is benefited equivalently by overt and covert reactions when such responding is appropriate.

The teacher's challenge is to get the audience responding inwardly or outwardly to the lesson in **relevant** ways. The key word here is "relevant." The learners must see a meaningful connection between their mental or behavioral activity and the lesson. The best activities stimulate the learner to relate the information to their own life events and to create personal links between such experiences and specific training principles or procedures.

There are many ways to provoke mindful or active learning. You can relate real-world events to the information you're presenting; you can pose questions that stimulate meaningful overt or covert reaction from the audience; or you can facilitate a group discussion or exercise that exemplifies certain points of a lesson. For example, ask participants to provide their own personal examples of a particular principle, or challenge them to derive an action plan that reflects key aspects of the lesson, or invite them to prepare a brief presentation or skit that illustrates a process or procedure.

### **Principle 5: Provide Feedback**

When learners contribute overtly in a training session, effective teachers provide constructive feedback. They provide specific information to show whether a verbal response or a skit is relevant or off the mark. Confirming feedback tells an individual or group certain principles or procedures of a lesson are understood, whereas corrective feedback points out a discrepancy between an overt reaction and a particular learning objective.

When giving corrective feedback, effective teachers do not make the learner feel like a failure. They maintain the mindset that observing an off-target reaction says more about teaching than learning. It gives teachers information they can use on-the-spot to explain miscommunication or misunderstanding. It can also provide direction for improving the overall presentation of a particular lesson.

### **Principle 6: Reward On-Target Reactions**

Confirming feedback tells the learners they understand certain essentials of a lesson. This bolsters a sense of personal accomplishment and is rewarding. Of course, the more important a learner perceives a lesson to be, the more rewarding is the confirming feedback. Recall Principle 1 – Begin instruction by explaining the value or rationale of a lesson.

Effective teachers use more than confirming feedback to reward their learners. They emphasize the significance of the information they are teaching, and express delight whenever someone in the group shows evidence of learning. Sometimes extrinsic rewards like points, trinkets, or recognition credits can keep

people motivated and facilitate the learning process. But it's critical to focus on natural rewards or positive consequences inherent to the learning process.

My point is illustrated in the figure 1. Do you see a problem here? Sure, the learner should feel good

about solving the problem.

That's the reward. Perhaps the teacher did not portray the importance of the lesson or the intrinsic sense of

accomplishment the student

should feel after learning

something. Bottom line:

Emphasize the value of

learning what you teach and

show sincere pleasure in any

evidence that your teaching is

effective.

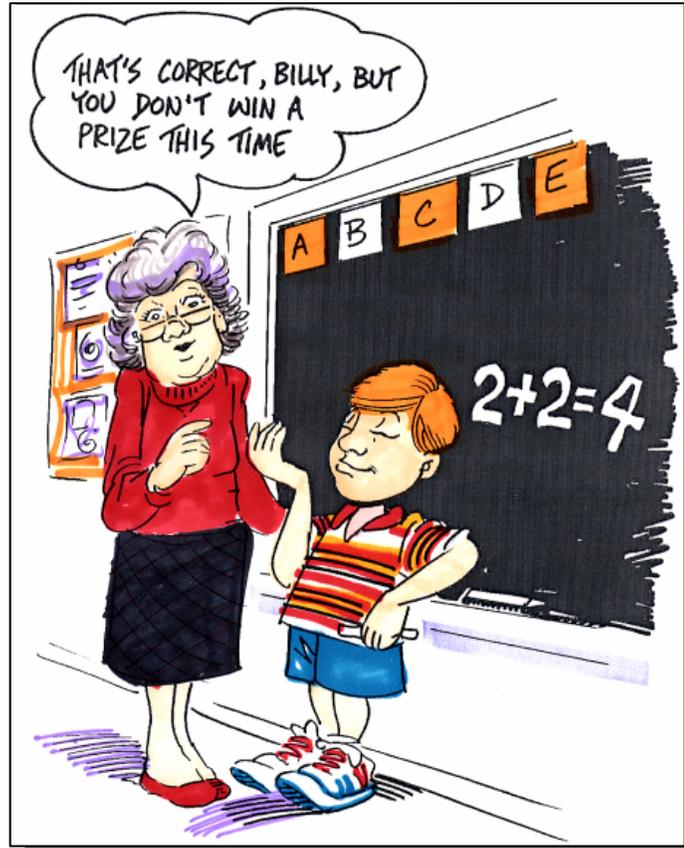


Figure 1. External rewards can reduce internal motivation.

### Principle 7: Provide an End-of-Session Evaluation

The term “evaluation” is a turn-off to most participants in a training session, including the teacher. Evaluation implies a “test,” and most people dislike tests. Teachers don't like developing and scoring them, and learners don't like taking them. As a result, many adult education/training sessions, from

professional development sessions at conferences to special on-site industrial programs, do not include an end-of-session evaluation.

But, let's be frank. Wouldn't knowledge that a "test" will be administered at the end of a training session make you more mindful from the start? If learners don't understand a concept they think they could be held accountable for knowing, they are likely to ask relevant questions. They hold the teacher accountable for explaining material they could be tested on later. And for many people, such mindful learning increases even when they are not required to put their name on the test. Such an anonymous evaluation is invaluable for the teacher.

Is there a better way to assess one's teaching effectiveness than to measure objectively whether the objectives of the lesson were met? This is the purpose of an end-of-session evaluation that assesses participants' knowledge and/or performance with regard to the objectives of the training session. Given this intuitive fact, why is this approach rarely used to evaluate presentations at industrial sites or professional development seminars?

### **In Conclusion**

This article reviewed seven basic guidelines for improving the impact of a group presentation, assuming the main purpose of the presentation is to teach. Often the most instructive lectures or talks are also entertaining. Why? Because people enjoy learning, especially when they believe the information is important. That's why effective teachers begin their lesson with the "why" or rationale

behind the principles or procedures to be covered. They convince their audience of meaningfulness by relating the information to real-world experience.

Effective teachers offer memory aids to help learners remember critical information, and they actively try to get their audience reacting to the information – overtly or covertly. They use feedback to keep their audience on track, and they use reward strategies to maintain interest and keep their audience feeling good about the learning process. Whenever appropriate they use end-of-session evaluations to test whether their learning objectives are accomplished. Then they alter their next presentation by addressing gaps between what they want to teach and what is learned. As a result, these teachers become more effective, thereby increasing the gap between effective and ineffective teachers.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions apply the principles reviewed here to provide leading-edge instruction in behavior-based safety. For more information about related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit [safety@safetyperformance.com](mailto:safety@safetyperformance.com) or call us at 540-951-7233.