

PREPARING FOR UNPLANNED DISCUSSIONS

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PASSION

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Whether we call ourselves trainers, facilitators, or learning and development professionals, we seek the limelight. Let's face it; anyone who enjoys standing up in front of people each and every day is probably not the shy, retiring type! Remember the last time you tried to speak to a roomful of trainers? How many times did you have to ask them to settle down and be quiet?

When we deliver a training program, isn't it tempting to stay firmly strapped in the pilot's seat, keeping on course for the destination of achieved learning objectives? Instead of stripes on our sleeves and peaked caps, we draw attention to our glamorous rank by brandishing marker pens and laser pointers. Who wants to be working in the back of the plane giving out blankets, pretzels, and meals on plastic trays? As professional facilitators, our place is most definitely in the back of the plane. Our role is not to fly the learners to their destination by the quickest route possible, but to provide a comfortable environment in which learners can relax and feel secure. To ensure that the training is engaging and truly addresses their needs, we need to leave it to the group to take control of their flight plan—to sit in the pilot's seat.

The Grand Tour

Most training programs, except perhaps those teaching a very set production process, can be viewed as a grand tour. As the facilitator, you need to deliver everyone back to work on time, having enabled them to achieve the stated learning objectives. However, imagine your training program as a journey. When you land in Paris, some of your learners may wish to take a side trip by train to the wine-growing region of Bordeaux in southwest France. Flying on to Cairo, they may insist on a quick visit by taxi to the pyramids. You may not have thought of these detours when you drew up the flight plan, but some members of the group will

resent you if you rush them back on the plane before they're ready, while others will be stressed by the delay if it means they'll arrive back at work late.

Trainers have a dual responsibility:

- To enable learners to achieve the stated learning objectives
- To ensure that the learning is relevant and useful to those learners

If we stick to achieving the objectives too rigidly, we stifle important and meaningful discussion and sharing. Drift too far off topic, however, and we alienate members of the group, run short of time, and fail to deliver on our promises.

When designing any training program, it is essential to leave time for diversions—there will always be some along the way! Allowing the group to take the pilot's role in their training program may take you to unexpected destinations—but these are the destinations your participants want, or need, to visit. How valuable will that be, compared with sticking exactly to your flight plan? One of the major advantages of bringing people together is enabling them to explore one another's perceptions and viewpoints. Managed badly, going off on a tangent will simply make your program run late. Anticipated and managed well, it adds useful information, develops new ideas, or addresses topics that are causing concern.

As a facilitator, it can be very challenging when your group is taking constant detours. Time is ticking away and you have several modules still to cover. How do you decide when to go off on a side trip and when to keep everyone firmly seated on the plane with their seat belts fastened and their tray tables in the upright position? It's essential to keep the big picture in mind: what am I trying to achieve with this group?

Good discussions will raise points that are clearly related to the learning objectives, although not directly addressed in the training materials. A simple detour here is natural; everyone can understand the value of exploring the issue because it has an obvious impact on the implementation of the learning.

It is not always possible to determine immediately whether or not the detour is relevant. Ask the group to expand on the information they have given you, and how it relates to the training materials. This is

where your back-of-the-plane people skills come into play. Assess reaction to the topic by reading the group's body language. If they look interested and alert, it is probably useful to pursue the topic for a while. It may simply be a subject that is currently on the minds of the participants; since no further learning will take place until the discussion has occurred, you might as well enjoy the detour.

If there are sighs, rolling eyes, individuals slumped back in their seats or simply no longer making eye contact with you, this may be an old chestnut that everyone is tired of hearing about. If this is the case, acknowledge the comments, and as soon as possible find a link from this topic back to the original flight plan. Your audience will be silently cheering you.

Negative body language could, however, be indicative of a contentious issue that will stir up strong emotions, in which case, watch out for turbulence ahead! Your role is still that of flight attendant. You need to keep everyone calm and make them feel secure. You may be dealing with some strong personalities. How you react to this situation will have major impact on your credibility. Consider whether the points being made are accurate and relevant to the training materials. Remind participants of their responsibility to the group—arguing is counter-productive, but healthy debate can solve many workplace issues by bringing them out into the open and brainstorming solutions to them.

It's important to address a contentious issue, even if the topic is not related to the training materials. If the air needs to be cleared, it's essential to do just that. There may be a small minority who feel strongly about this issue. Unless their points are acknowledged and validated, they will continue to rumble like distant thunder. In this instance, you may need to take on the pilot's role briefly. Ask permission from the group before you take them off on this detour. It will alert them to the fact that you're leaving the flight plan behind for a while to explore an important landmark along the way. Explain why you feel you need to enter or prolong the debate. Be sure to draw a line under this issue once it has been dealt with, and pass the pilot role back to the group.

If the group is going off on unrelated tangents repeatedly, do a quick assessment. Do they have a pet peeve that they need to air? Are they engaged in the training, or are they having trouble staying awake

without a little diversion? Are you insisting they join in discussions? (They may be insecure in their knowledge and go off on a tangent to try to cover this up.) Are they being asked to share information that is too personal or sensitive? Do they understand what the learning objectives are and the timelines for the program?

Some of you may still be wondering how it's possible to allow the group to take on the job of pilot while you work at the back of the plane. It's all about building an atmosphere of trust, security, and expectations. Think about the flights you've been on. By the end of the flight, pretzels, drinks, and meals will have been served and cleared away, duty-free sold, the movie will have played, everyone's seat belts will be refastened, and all the tray tables will be in the upright position. We know that is the way it will be as we come in to land. Why? Because we trust those flight attendants to keep us comfortable and entertained throughout the trip—and to make certain we're safe as we reach our destination. The flight attendants may have been continually interrupted by overly demanding passengers; they may have had to strap themselves into their seats during some severe turbulence; that crying baby needed a bottle warmed every half an hour; but by the end of the trip they've always made time to fit in everything that's expected of them and bring the flight to its usual calm and organized conclusion.

If we recognize that unplanned discussions will occur, and we are prepared to address them appropriately, we can relinquish our position of control. Secure in the knowledge that we do have an overall picture of where we're headed, and that by the end of the training program the seat belts will be fastened and the tray tables will be in the upright position, our learners can sit up in the cockpit and enjoy the ride.