

What Makes Some Training Topics So Tough?

*I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand
a single word of what I am saying.*

—Oscar Wilde

Key

This chapter introduces the trainer to two obvious ideas: (1) certain topics are not popular with training course participants and (2) so what do you do about it? The reasons behind the first point are often based on the past experiences or the current work culture of the participants. And the second point asks, “What are you willing to do, as the presenter of the moment, to make their session positive, dynamic, and even memorable?”

You're the training director, manager, or head of a one-person training department. The assignment today is to conduct new employee orientation (again) to those bright and shining faces sitting before you, pens at the ready, eager to learn. They're a willing training audience because they have to be one. They laugh at your jokes, nod alertly at your most cogent points, take copious notes, review the material you hand out to them, and promise to abide by

the phone book–thick set of policies and procedures in their new kit bag. You leave the training platform feeling like the world is your PowerPoint™.

You're an outside training consultant, in-house company attorney, or the corporate counsel. You find yourself standing in a room full of department heads, managers, and frontline supervisors. They've gathered here for the sole purpose of sitting through the yearly sexual harassment lecture. Perhaps the culture of the organization has shifted a bit, boundaries are being blurred, and the media-driven times have given some employees the "freedom" to speak their minds.

It's time to tighten up on this behavior. It's time, says senior management, to round up the usual suspects and hit them over the head with the law book again. So you start your lecture on the do's and don'ts of quid pro quo versus the sexually harassing or hostile work environment. By the end, you've successfully divided the room into equal thirds: one group that feels embarrassed for being male, one group that feels embarrassed for being female, and one group that doesn't know why they're suddenly angry for having given you two hours of their time.

Perhaps you're an outside consultant and an HR generalist and you've been asked to conduct a sexual harassment prevention course for frontline employees. You study up on the latest litigation sagas and get the dollar figures right in your mind. After about your third story involving some hapless firm that was sued successfully for an egregious violation, you realize your approach has made the lights go on for several of the more entrepreneurial participants. After the course, several of them take long lunches and head to their favorite labor law attorneys, convinced they now have million-dollar cases.

These are only a few of the potential training room disasters that await presenters who work for or with organizations. This book offers a lifeline for these scenarios and others for which the topics and the audiences are tough.

The definition of a "tough training topic" is this: It's often driven by a negative event in the organization. It often features a subject that is seen or has been historically perceived by the stakeholders (the attendees, the client who brings the trainer in, and even the trainer) as difficult to teach, hard to sit through, and laden with emotional or legal baggage. Attendance is often

mandatory. The group's reaction to both the subject and the trainer's delivery can range from polite indifference to outright hostility.

People come to tough training topics with preconceptions, misconceptions, and apprehensions. The featured subject may remind them of their vulnerability in the workplace, including their lack of knowledge about the issue, fear of discipline or termination for violations, or the fear of either being victimized by others or even falsely accused, in the case of significant behavioral concerns.

Attending training for behavioral subjects can dredge up unpleasant memories from, with, or by past perpetrators. I have taught client-mandatory sexual harassment programs with both past victims and documented harassers in the same room. I have presented drug and alcohol programs with people in the room who had just finished rehabilitation stints for substance abuse. I taught a workplace violence program to an organization that had just suffered through an employee's suicide. The wife of the victim (a man who had threatened her and other employees) was ordered to go by her employer, against my express wishes. I never mentioned the case to the group, although they all knew about it and kept looking at her for her reaction throughout the class. When she came to me sobbing after the first break, I told her she could leave and I would square it with her supervisor. She thanked me and left and I finished another tough training topic in a tough environment.

Adult Learning Methods: Revising Kirkpatrick

In 1959, University of Wisconsin professor Don Kirkpatrick put it best when he described the impact of training on the classroom participants as reaching one of four possible levels (Alliger & Janak, 1989):

1. Reaction—measures how those who participate in the program react to it.
2. Learning—the extent to which participants change attitudes, improve knowledge, and increase skill as a result of attending the program.
3. Behavior—the extent to which a change in behavior has occurred because the participants attended the training program.

4. Results—the final results that occurred because the participants attended the program.

Well, with kudos and respect to Mr. K, here's "Dr. Steve Albrecht's Take on the Kirkpatrick Model," in the light of 21st century thinking.

Level 1: They Came. They Sat Through Your Lecture. They Left.

Maybe they liked the trainer, the fact they got out of work for some span of time, or just the doughnuts and coffee. Maybe they hated the subject or the content of the program, yet enjoyed the trainer's approach. Maybe the reverse was true and a ham-fisted course leader ruined an otherwise good program. Perhaps the course content or the presenter failed to inspire them to change, adjust, or improve their behavior or skills.

Level 2: They Came. They Sat Through Your Lecture. They Learned Enough to Pass the Post-Test or Demonstrate Some Basic Level of Competence or Understanding in the Near Future.

Here, the goal is simply compliance and the course leader helped them reach it. The order of the day was "Stop doing X, Y, or Z" or "Start doing A, B, and C." By various means (sheer personality, a solid design, interesting exercises), the instructor got this group to learn one or more points and demonstrate this new knowledge. Whether they can "keep on keeping on" or whether they revert back to their old ways remains to be seen. The hope is, of course, that these new tools, skills, behaviors, policies, or rules will stick beyond the glow of the moment in the training environment.

Level 3: They Came. They Sat Through Your Lecture. They Learned Enough to Want to or Be Able to Change, Improve, or Modify Their Own Behavior as a Manager or Employee, Almost Immediately.

At this level, the training program resonated with the participants enough for them to see the wisdom of the materials and presentation. Collectively, many of them begin to apply the knowledge, tools, or policies in visible or measurable ways. For example, safety problems or accidents diminish, individual

production or performance improves across the board, and new policies or procedures bear fruit in terms of the employees' or managers' individual behaviors.

Level 4: They Came. They Sat Through Your Lecture. And They Learned Enough to Want to or Be Able to Change the Way Their Department or Organization Does Its Business, Starting Today.

Here, the group leaves satisfied and begins to work synergistically to improve the overall performance of their respective work group, team, or department. Changes are both visible and invisible, but the performance improvement is undeniable either way. We see evidence of compliance, cohesion, communication, and perhaps even the reduction of conflict between group members. Managers and frontline supervisors find it easier to remind their people of key points, outcomes, or tools from the training program and, as a result, the course and concepts develop good word-of-mouth momentum. Future sessions are well-attended and the successful training creates more success stories as it permeates the organization and its personnel.

Training at the Level One stage can best be described as the “Fizzle Factor” in action. The program simply died on the vine. At our Goal Level, which is Level Four, however, the trainer has accomplished his or her mission:

- Gathered the various stakeholders to discuss the issues;
- Created a convincing and/or entertaining method (humor, videos, stories, individual or group exercises) to educate them about the subject, policy, or procedure at hand;
- Used methods to help the participants recap what they learned (pre- and post-tests, reviews, feedback, Q&A sessions, and other methods); and
- Checked back at intervals (one week, one month, six months, or whatever) to see how the participants are actually using what they learned on the job, alone, in their work groups, with their customers, and with their bosses.

Training at Level One is probably the toughest on both parties—the trainer and the trainees. A lack of engagement on either of their parts makes for a long morning or afternoon. And here are the hardest “tough training topic” questions of all:

- How do you prove a negative?
- How do you prove what you taught them stopped their negative behavior?
- How do you know, absent of a repeat of the negative event that brought you to the front of the room in the first place, that you’ve succeeded?

The hard answers to each? You don’t. If you put a locking device on the steering wheel of your car and you come out the next morning, and your car is still there, what have you proved? Nothing! Either the thief walked by, saw the lock, and was deterred enough to find another car to steal, or he never walked by at all.

And so it goes with tough training topics; you may never know or be able to prove that what you said or did with the group had an impact. But you keep getting up in front of them because you know that, while your results may be hard to measure, they exist, and what you do is important, now and in their future.

Content Versus Delivery

The goal of any training program for every participant should be to retain the material and be able to apply it. Training is not effective simply because the trainer, the internal/external client, or even the feedback sheets say it was. It’s only effective when we see a change, even a slight one, in the participants’ behaviors. They *stop* doing something they have been doing that was detrimental to their health, safety, or work performance. They *start* doing something different, in terms of improving their job productivity or performance, by using a new skill or technique you’ve just taught them. Or they keep on keeping on, continuing to work at a level that satisfies them and their organization, using what you have taught them as a benchmark into the future.

So when it comes to the question between where you should put your design emphasis—content (*what* you tell them) versus delivery (*how* you tell them)—the answer is: It depends. (Not only is this always a useful phrase when one of your attendees poses a head-scratching question, it's also completely true with most life issues; it *does* depend.)

One of my many flaws as a beginning trainer was over-preparation. My exercises were too complicated, my lectures were too long and complex, and my breaks too few. I was convinced that because I had a lot of information about my various subject areas, that I had to cram all of what I knew into the heads of the participants. This led to my expanding the content so much that I took all of the life (read that as fun) out of the program.

The kinder feedback sheets had the same themes: “Smart guy. Knows his subject. Lots of material. Seemed kind of rushed. Hard to know what to use in all that. Kind of like drinking from a fire hose.” The less-than-kind feedback sheets were less polite: “Talks way too much. Not enough hands-on learning. Too much, too fast. Who cares anyway? I just came for the food and the overtime.”

Sadly (for the people who suffered through my first years on the platform), I took these words to mean that I needed to prepare even more material and work even harder to get my point across. Finally, some kind and generous training peers took me aside and pointed at my inches-thick personal leader's guides and said, “Lighten up. It's not how smart you are, it's how smart you can make them, in the time you have.”

And of course they were right. In my rush to fill the course time span with content, I took out all the fun. I soon discovered that it's all about balance—and something called the Strength-Weakness Irony, which says:

“Your strength, when taken to an extreme, becomes a weakness.”

I was smart enough, but that's never enough. Too much taxation of participants' gray matter, without the insertion of something memorable, makes for a training session that is lifeless and dull. I had to learn how to *spice up* the delivery and *whittle down* the content to its most useful essence.

In the battle between Content versus Delivery, there are four distinct camps:

1. High in Content—High in Delivery
2. Low in Content—High in Delivery
3. High in Content—Low in Delivery
4. Low in Content—Low in Delivery

We can define “content” as the type of material presented, the depth to which it is covered, the complexity of the information, and whether it is data, information, policies, or procedures that are made “sticky,” that is, memorable later.

We can define “delivery” as the way we present the material: using humor, stories, group or individual exercises, team-building or problem-solving events, videos, magic tricks, lectures and lecturettes, pre-reading or post-training work, pre- or post-tests, or anything short of lighting a portion of yourself on fire and sprinting around the room, to make the session memorable later.

Which of the above four is the best or worst for the participants depends on their respective points of view. From where they sit, there are advantages to some of these four, but not all. When you review the list again, the rank is probably fairly close to how most participants want it.

High in Content—High in Delivery

This is good for them and good for you, as the presenter. They come away saying, “That was not too bad, enjoyable even. I learned a lot; it wasn’t too painful. The time went by quickly and there were some valuable ideas.”

For you, this is the good news, in terms of the feedback. The bad news is that this area requires the hardest effort and preparation for you as a presenter. This is where the now-popular request for information and entertainment becomes “infotainment.” You must have a deep and thorough knowledge of your material and you must present it in a way that stimulates, amuses, and connects with your audience. Training at this level means you give a *performance*, not just a program.

While working at this level requires the most pre-training effort for you, it also provides the biggest payoff: great feedback, high levels of retention, higher client satisfaction, and “viral marketing,” meaning that people tell other people and future courses fill up through good word of mouth.

Low in Content—High in Delivery

The good news is that this training approach tends to be the most popular with almost every audience who experiences it. There's laughter, energy, good feelings, and the whole thing starts and ends on a high note.

The bad news is that they often leave without having learned a bloody thing. When asked to give feedback to those who ask how it went, they say, "It was great! We sang songs, made paper hats, and laughed at some funny jokes!" It's only when they're asked what they actually learned or remember about the program that the head scratching and the puzzled looks begin.

This is one of the hardest knocks on people who make their living doing what could be called "pure" motivational speaking. This approach is all sizzle and no steak, with a good-looking man or woman, with nice hair and straight white teeth, ranting and sweating on the stage, feverishly pumping the crowd to "go and live their dreams" or similar swell-sounding but hard-to-apply messages.

This approach is also popular with a certain strata of trainers who were taught or who believe that people need to be doing some kind of group or individual activity every five minutes or it's not really training. "You can't just talk to them. You have to *engage* them to get them to learn anything. Studies tell us this, you know."

The irony of the low content—high delivery approach is that sometimes the participants feel later as if they have been cheated. Their good times and good fun masked the fact that they didn't actually learn anything new, acquire necessary skills, or accomplish much of any importance. Those participants who see their time as valuable and want to know more about the subjects in question will demand more from the presenter than just good feelings at the end.

High in Content—Low in Delivery

This was my old disease and I had it bad. Another tag for this approach is the "Brainy College Professor Model." Here, the noted astronomer, physicist, or Nobel Laureate in romance languages working at the prestigious university enters a lecture hall filled with two hundred students, picks up a piece of chalk, turns to the chalkboard, and starts lecturing. Two or so hours later, the lecture is finished and the professor turns and leaves the building. Lots of

information, zero interaction with the students, who are supposed to be enthralled by the sheer brain power in the room with them.

As a training approach, the heavy-on-the-information, straight lecture style can lead to brutal feedback sheets. It's not uncommon to see people in the audience simply throw down their pens in disgust, as the information overload has made it too difficult to take notes or keep up with the lecture.

The more complex the subject, the more this is the wrong way to teach it. Most people will start out trying to keep up, but after a few hours, where they've had little or no opportunity to engage with the presenter, ask questions, or catch their collective breaths, they will just tune it all out.

The irony of this approach is that the content experts think it's the *audience's fault* if they get bored, can't assimilate the material, or otherwise slump in their seats from intellectual exhaustion. "They're just not as smart as I am" is their rationalizing mantra. "They should learn to adjust to my lecturing style, not the other way around" is a common justification for putting people's feet to sleep.

Low in Content—Low in Delivery

This is the worst of the worst; no one learned anything and it was boring to boot. This approach is most common with novice trainers who break all the rules: stand in front of the projector and block the slides; mumble in a monotone; consult notes frequently, so they get a good view of the top of his or her head; turn away from the group and simply read the content of each and every slide verbatim; forget to give breaks; wander off the topic; fail to ask or answer questions; and close the session in a discomforting way, for example, "I hope I didn't bore you too much. Hah hah. . . ."

Sometimes, trainers trapped at this level don't mean to be this bad; they just don't know any better or can't help themselves. I once worked with a colleague who was earnest and smart and nice and a lousy trainer. This person couldn't tell a joke without blowing the punch line, couldn't come up with one relevant story to further illustrate the content of a slide, and couldn't stop standing in front of the projector, ever. After one year of trying, the person gave up and realized that some people are destined to train and others are not. It's not a reflection of any personality flaw; it's just a stylistic issue.

When you have a flair for this business it shows, and when you don't, even after numerous attempts and much coaching and support, that shows too. Audiences will be kind to rookies to a point, but when some of the less tactful participants smell blood in the water, it may be time to pack your marking pens and try something less taxing to the thickness of your skin.

The story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" was more right than we know: Sometimes, too short is too short and too long is too long. Sometimes, you need handouts and sometimes you don't. You can speak too fast on some issues and not fast enough on others. If you feel passionate about the point, you can go on for a good long time, in an animated way, and still keep your audience's attention throughout. Or, if you're not too committed to the ideas or the teaching method to get them across, the audience will sense this as well.

Perhaps some real perspective about all this will help. I attend a number of training seminars and learning programs each year, as part of my consulting work, to review the efforts of my own training subcontractors, and for my own personal or professional development (sharpening the saw, as Stephen Covey would put it).

After years of sitting through hours and hours of other people's training approaches, styles, and formats, I've boiled it down to this theme, which I provide to each audience I teach today:

We will be here together for eight hours. I'm going to talk to you and with you about a number of things. I plan to share with you what I believe, and your organization believes, you will need to know about this subject. It may shock some of you to learn that not everything I say will be useful to you. I won't be offended if you don't take copious notes or hang on my every word. About half of what I tell you will probably leave your heads as soon as we're done today. That's human nature and it says something about the way we are all bombarded by too many messages, too many good ideas to remember at once. So here's all I'm asking of you today: If you can take one or two important concepts or key points from our morning session and one or two important concepts or key points from our afternoon session, then it will be a good day for both of us. I'm willing to go hard to teach the first 50 percent, so if you

promise to go hard to learn the next 50 percent, then we'll get out of here on time and it will have been a good day.

Ten Ingredients That Make for a Tough Training Day

The following set of disappointments can make your time on the training platform painfully long, no matter how much experience you have. Better to see them here now and either take steps to prevent them later, or be ready to sidestep their impact when they arise (and they will).

1. Bad Warm-Up Act

You've penned a carefully crafted bio sheet, listing just the right mix of education and accomplishments, so as to build early rapport with your audience. Your introducer flubs the pronunciation of your name, skips sections in your introduction, ad-libs it, throws in some of his or her own jokes, and rings the death bell with witty lines like, "He or she will try not to bore you too much" or "I hope nobody falls asleep, since it's right after lunch."

The cure here is to be politely but forcefully direct. Meet with your introducer several minutes before the session and say, "Here's my bio sheet. I put a lot of work into it so I can connect with these folks right away. I've put my name phonetically here at the top [a good idea if your name is even slightly hard to pronounce] and I'd like you to please read this word-for-word, just as you see it here. If you have any questions as you're reviewing it, please let me know. Thanks very much for making me look good here today."

2. Bad Room

A hard and harsh fluorescent light shines right over the screen, obliterating the majestic colors of your slides. There is a high-ceilinged echo effect in various places where you stand. Outside, the gardeners are hard at work with their leaf blowers or, if you're truly blessed, the city has chosen today to tear up the nearby street with a jackhammer. The architect conveniently asked the builder to install several formidable concrete pillars in the path between the audience and your podium. While these are great for load-bearing, they force

people to crane their necks around cement to get a view of you if you move even three feet in either direction.

This problem is best answered by Teddy Roosevelt, who said: “Do the best you can, with what you have, where you are.” Don’t let a bad design hem you in as a moving trainer or otherwise ruin your day. Don’t harp on it with the group. Make a few humorous asides about the kitchen noise or the harsh glare from the curtain-less windows and move on to your business.

When it comes to the visual design of the room, know that nothing is necessarily permanent. If you can, start by making bold changes, moving chairs into different seating arrangements other than just rows. If the screen is not fixed, move it to another part of the room, even behind you, and turn the chairs around. Aim your projector on a bare, white wall, instead of using their screen. Cover the windows with taped-together easel pad sheets. Improvise, adapt, and be creative. It’s your space for that time span.

3. Bad Equipment

The microphone whistles when you get too close to the air conditioning vent, which is giving off a loud but sickly hum of warm air. Your computer has chosen this moment in its life to start giving you error messages. Your projector decides to act up, flickers, and then goes dark.

First off, know your equipment. Always make certain you have all the necessary power cords, extension cords, and power strips with you in your trainer’s bag. Don’t rely on the client to have the necessary power supplies nearby. In some training rooms, the power outlets are in the floor, in others they’re on the wall near the screen area, and in still others, nowhere to be found.

If you have any hint of technical problems as you’re setting up, be ready to preface your opening remarks with what I call “the 5 percent warning.” Here, you simply remind the group, with a smile, that electronics, like life, rarely work the way you planned. If they have any familiarity with computers, they’ll sympathize, since it’s probably happened to them as well. If any technical glitches do arise, it may help to ask, “Is there a computer doctor in the house?” Most groups have at least one PC or audiovisual aficionado in their midst, so perhaps he or she can come to your rescue.

While this person is fiddling with the connections, march on, switching subjects or directions if you need to, until the break, when you can devote more time and energy to any repairs.

4. Bad Slides or Handouts

You were in a hurry, so you didn't notice the client's company name is misspelled on the title pages of two hundred copies of the handouts. Or the client has copied your masters in the wrong order, skipping some pages and switching others. You notice not one but several typos on both the slides and the handouts (since one is a derivation of the other). The colors for the slides, which looked so perfect in the light of your office, look washed out or harsh in the light of the training room.

Some things you can control and others you can't. Typos and bad slide designs are certainly under your control. Have other people look at your materials, both on the computer screen and in print, before you present them or make the necessary handout copies. Other eyes will almost always catch poor grammar, misspellings, or other typos that you miss by being too close to the material.

If the slide color scheme doesn't fit the room lighting, jump right into PowerPoint™ and make the background color changes on the fly. This is yet another reason to get to the training room early enough to set up and test the slides in that light. Simply changing the background color can do a lot to improve the look and quality of the slides.

5. Bad Participant(s)

As Chapter Three will illustrate in traumatic detail, there is no shortage of stories about how certain participants can make for a long training day. While teaching a negotiating seminar on the east coast, I had three officers from a trade union in attendance. During the three-day program, they returned from each lunch break loud and drunk. They fought with each other (the alcohol talking) and, at one point, they all got into a shoving match with other participants during a case study exercise. I asked them to leave and they did. They asked for a refund from the client and didn't get it.

My father, Karl Albrecht, tells a classic story about a frontline employee who came to one of his service management seminars. Once the program began, she made a big display of showing her displeasure at being “forced” to attend the “mandatory” training. She turned her chair in the opposite direction of the other attendees, crossed her arms, and stared at the far wall. My dad asked her if she wanted to leave and she said, “I can’t because this is mandatory training. But nobody told me I had to participate.” He agreed and asked if anyone else felt as upset about being there as she did. No one raised his or her hand.

Karl then said, “I’m sorry you’re upset with your situation. I’m going to continue. You’re welcome to join us at this table here if you want, or you’re free to go back to work. I’ll tell your supervisor personally that you had my permission to sit this one out.” At that point, with all of her peers looking at her in disgust and amusement, she decided to join with the others. She got through the day unscathed and so did everyone else.

The point is: You can’t change their personalities and you can’t change their views of their world. You can only offer to provide a safe and comfortable learning environment.

6. Bad Energy

Here, it’s not necessarily one or more unruly participants, it’s the whole room. Perhaps you got started late, due to problems with traffic or equipment, or the room was locked when you arrived. Perhaps people continue to trickle in once you have begun and this disrupts your thoughts. Perhaps someone has said something negative at the start and the room has suddenly turned cold. Perhaps your best icebreakers, jokes, magic tricks, exercises, and room energizers have all fallen flat. It happens and it’s not fun.

Sometimes it *is* your fault and sometimes it is what it is. Comedians and other live performers talk about bad energy in the crowds and how, on some nights, you just don’t connect. When faced with this scene, training pros keep on keeping on, continuing to try to salvage the experience with their best materials and best efforts. Novice trainers turn sullen, rationalize that it’s the fault of the crowd, and blame everyone and everything except themselves.

Sometimes it's you and sometimes it's them and sometimes it's a combination of both. If a joke falls flat, smile and move on. Deal with early hostility in a positive, professional, and diplomatic way. Don't lose your objectivity by losing your cool. Debating endlessly with a hostile participant will never win you any points with the other audience members. They will end up resenting you and the other person. This is not a nightclub, so you don't win laughs by engaging with or putting down any hecklers. Be a pro and work through to the end. There's always another day, another group.

7. Bad Corporate Climate

Hostile, argumentative, and apathetic crowds are not just the names of punk rock bands; they're reasons why you can be set up to fail. Like the Bad Energy problem, the culture of the client organization is usually toxic rather than nourishing. Poisonous organizations—where people don't communicate on purpose, don't get along with each other by choice, or where there is a high degree of labor-management tension—don't often respond to training subjects very well.

This aura of hostility can come across to you, in the comments you hear from the participants before you begin the program and in the questions you get during the breaks, "Why doesn't my boss have to attend this?" or "Are you only here because of some kind of incident or problem?"

I've had experiences where people are required to come to mandated training and they simply sign the roster and leave. I've had groups who came in and wore their sunglasses inside for the length of the training. I've taught programs to people who challenged me with increasingly hostile questions right from the start, as if I was the enemy, even though I was just an outsider with a projector.

It's challenging and nerve-racking once the group starts saying things like, "None of this stuff you're telling us will do any good. Nothing will change around here. We've tried doing this before and it always ends up back the same way as usual."

One way to get these kinds of groups on your side is to wave the white flag early. Here's what I usually say to tough crowds, whose anger has been fueled by past events or experiences:

I hear what you're all saying to me. I know it's important to you that management gets your message too. What I propose is that we go ahead with the training as planned and I will start adding your comments to a series of "Parking Lot" easel pages. I promise to type these up and provide them to senior management. I won't try to fool you by saying that you'll see immediate changes based on your comments or requests. I will, however, be your messenger for these important issues.

8. Bad Introductory or Closing Comments by Senior Management

One of the ways you can often detect both bad climates and bad leaders is by listening to the opening or closing comments by the senior person who opens or closes the training session. This person may stay for only a few minutes at the beginning (just enough time to do significant damage to the group's morale or your overall message) or this person may show up again at the end of the program (to douse the group with ice water).

I had one session where the HR director started off a sexual harassment program for all employees by telling a truly tasteless (and potentially sexually harassing) joke. When it fell absolutely flat, she said, "And now here's Steve to teach you what not to do or say at work." When she left, I started by saying to the group, "Rule Number One: Don't do what she just did!"

It was a risk, to go after her in that manner, and it breaks one of my cardinal rules of not making sport of senior management. But, with the air suddenly thick with tension, I felt I had to do something to get them on my side and quickly. They laughed and we moved on.

In another program where I facilitated a real-time tabletop exercise for a disaster response/business continuity situation, the director of the group watched the entire exercise play out with little comment. At the end of the session, when the participants and I were congratulating each other on what we all felt was a successful conclusion, the director said, "If this had been a real situation, you'd have all failed."

Four hours of effort and good feelings disappeared in a flash. The group turned sullen, packed their things, and left without another word to me or each other.

These are dicey issues. You don't want to risk alienating a senior manager or executive, who may have brought you in, but you don't want his or her opening or closing remarks to sabotage your hard-earned efforts. I believe you have to coach them (gently) by offering small reminders (or even provide a short paragraph or two) of how you'd like the person to open or close the training session.

9. Bad Closing Ceremonies by the Trainer

There is an art to starting a training program and an art to ending one. Begging for approval by begging for applause is cloying and creates discomfort in the audience. Ending too abruptly can create a tension in the group that gets reflected in the feedback sheets. Spend too long wrapping it up and people start leaving mid-sentence. The key to closing strongly is to use a combination of humility and a quick content review. Here's an approach that has worked for me:

We've come to an end of our session and I want to tell you how much I've appreciated your participation and feedback. We've covered a lot of ground in a short period of time, including Topics A, B, C and Issues X, Y, Z. I hope I've given you some tools for success in these areas. And speaking of feedback, it's time to give me some, on the sheets we've provided for you. Thanks for coming. Please give yourself a hand for your hard work today. Thanks again.

The message here is simple: I'm asking you to clap for yourself, but in reality, you're clapping for us both. In a perfect world, your client or previous introducer will formally ask the crowd to give you a hand, but it's not a requirement. You're asking them to reward themselves for their efforts and, by proxy, your efforts as well. By giving a quick review of the core "Most Important Points," you give them a reminder of what to comment on, using the feedback sheets.

10. Bad Trainer

This is an obvious but painful one. Sometimes tough training topics are made even tougher by a lousy trainer. Everyone is entitled to a rough day, but some people in this business don't continuously improve or change their style, even when the feedback sheets and pointed comments from colleagues or the clients ask them to do so.

To survive in the training environment, you have to have some talent, some luck, and some guts. The best slides in the galaxy won't help if you can't connect with people. Teaching tough training topics is about building enough rapport to keep your group comfortable (they cannot learn much under stress), creating a safe learning environment so they can participate in the learning events, and imparting your knowledge in thoughtful, organized, and creative ways.

