

Product Training

Benefits

- Go from 'chalk and talk' to 'walk and talk' training
- Fuse some simple accelerated learning principles into your product training so people remember it.
- Some tips to make 'dry' training less dry for the receivers

Key items to this article.

1. Hard training versus soft training
2. Getting them doing stuff

Hard Training Vs Soft Training**

I have found that teaching products to people is the ultimate comfort blanket for trainers. It is fantastic because you can say things like, 'yes, that is correct,' and 'no, that's not quite right.' With Product training, there are right and wrong answers which gives me immense satisfaction because most of the training I do now is 'soft skills' so I tend to give answers to questions like, 'Well, it does *depend* on the situation.'

Once you have got your head around the material, you are able to have that nonchalance that your old Maths teacher would have when he points at you at bellows, "Tizzard, what does pie (Angela – I could not find the Pie symbol on my computer have you got it?) equal?"

'Is it 3.5 Sir?' I mumble.

And when you get it wrong, he can say triumphantly, 'No, it is 3.14!'

'But why is it 3.14?' I venture

'It just is Tizzard!'

There you have it. It is always that answer, regardless of the weather, or pay structure, or if it was passed over for promotion, or if just feels like being a different number today. It is not a '*depends*' type answer.

There is great comfort in that for both trainers and delegates if you are that way inclined.

The 'trouble' with product training - and you can include your Health and Safety, Security Procedures, I.T. training or in fact anything that requires a process that must be followed - is that it can become heavy going delivering it. I have the greatest respect for those trainers that are able to deliver this so called 'Hard Training' whilst keeping a lightness about the subject. When we have to cover everything and it has to be done a certain way, it places a pressure on the trainer that can only be accommodated by prioritising the behaviours available to us. The behaviour that will become top priority is adopting a serious tone which becomes more pronounced the more likely you are to die if you don't adopt the process.

It might look something like this.

Most Serious
tone

Less Serious
tone

If you don't follow this risk management, health and safety process etc you will suffer a public shaming, die a slow horrible death and all of your family will be left destitute.

This is how you use this new I.T. system, this is how you use this particular product for our customers etc. If you don't follow it there will be repercussions but your family will still be able to eat.

I found that the behaviour that I used to prioritise out is the one that involves humour, smiling and just calming down. The bizarre thing about this is that when we are on training courses, we all know that fear of getting something wrong. We all know that numb feeling in our lower quarters when we are aware of sitting down on nasty plastic chairs listening to someone drone on. We also know the feeling of suppressing a well earned yawn and fantasising about the sudden unexplained illness you are going to develop for day two of this course you are on...

So, why do we do that to ourselves and our learners?

Maybe somewhere in the recesses of our heads we believe it will help them learn it more effectively if it is more serious – these are serious messages after all.

I have noticed in my career as a trainer some friction between 'hard trainers' and 'soft trainers.' We actually know that both approaches are equally valid in their own right. The 'Hard' trainers struggle with the 'fluffies' as they see them. The 'Soft'

trainers struggle with the importance of the ‘right way’ that hard trainers approach training.

I know that there is a middle ground. Garry Platt introduced the idea to me that you can mix the two approaches up to get better results. For instance, training something like Customer Care (typically a ‘soft’ area) in a hard manner. Examples would be TGIs who I believe train their staff to follow a process when delivering service e.g.

- **Greet customer within 20 seconds**
- **Give out first menu within 1 minute**
- **Take order within so many...**
- **And so on.**

This allows a standard to be followed without losing the individual creativity of the individuals delivering the service. It does not say in the process ‘smile for a minimum of 14 seconds whilst displaying at least two pre-molars.’

Reversing this approach would be to say something like, ‘Today we are going to talk about the Health and Safety procedures in our company, but before we do, please take a few minutes with your partner to think about the impact of losing your job due to a terrible work based injury...’

So, the first tip is to think when running product training is to remind yourself that people can often be zapped back to their school days when there is a right and wrong answer. This can result in some of those earlier behaviours emerging such as, being ‘difficult,’ or mucking around or bringing you an apple. Anything is possible.

Second tip. Consider, is there a way of reversing the typical training trend? I have to cover this particular product and it has to be done in a certain way – well that is a given. How

about trying some of the techniques in the next section – get them doing stuff?

Get them doing stuff

This section contains some tips about getting people staying more active during quite tight product training. The ideas can also be applied to any area that involves training material that is either right or wrong.

The main components of this section are based around getting people involved in the product training using some accelerated learning principles. This will include getting them up and active and also improve their overall retention of the material.

One of the main pitfalls of training something that is ‘right or wrong’ or technical in nature is that we, as trainers, know too much about the subject. This in itself is not a problem, but when you know everything about a subject and it makes sense to us, it is easy to forget that when you first come across new ‘right or wrong’ material, it can seem quite daunting. This is exacerbated when the trainer loses patience if you don’t ‘get it’ straight away. Hence adding in some accelerated principles can take a lot of the pressure away from the trainer having to know everything about the subject. Also, the more relaxed atmosphere stops the reptilian protective part of their brain kicking in due to them feeling threatened by the situation.

Accelerated principles.

I stumbled upon this approach initially by accident. I was training something like the only currencies that can be accepted onboard an aircraft and I experienced that moment when the audience had mentally left the room and you know they are only staying there because they are being paid. I thought to myself that it was mad this whole way of training.

We both have the same goal which is for them to know the procedures and knowledge well enough to pass their exam. I realised that at that moment, if they have mentally left the room, I may as well let them go home now to revise as that is where they will learn it – not here under these conditions. I also noticed that the more serious I got - to make sure they understand the importance of it all - the more they ‘zoned’ me out of their heads; a skill they probably learned as a teenager when being admonished about staying out late or not tidying their room or any other myriad of reasons.

I had an epiphany that I could be doing more to help them to help me. I have not looked back since whenever I am asked to deliver ‘right and wrong’ training.

Here are some tips that work well with product training and all training that involves there being a right and wrong way of doing it.

Tip 1 – knowledge check

Find out what they know already. This seems obvious but it is easy to assume that they know nothing about the subject matter whatsoever which then puts us into the ‘expert’ position. The danger of this is that we can assume, if not careful, a parental all-knowing role that will turn learners off straight away. Good questions to ask:

- 1. What do you know about this subject already?**
- 2. If you do not know anything, what do you imagine today will be about?**
- 3. What would I need to do to make it worth your while today?**
- 4. Anybody who feels that they have something to add to the day in terms of relevant previous knowledge please let**

me know. (This deals with the problem of the 'Expert in the room' who does not feel he/she is being acknowledged so will take every opportunity to pick flaws in your delivery)

Tip 2 – Airline Case Study (discovery learning)

Theme the event if you can. A theme makes something difficult very memorable. If the training is around a certain product, put it everywhere that they can see. One way we used to cover training to do with the aircraft, was to turn the classroom into an aircraft. We made the chairs a similar configuration to the aircraft for instance so people could more easily see the product in action. One of the ideas that worked really well was to let the group create their own aircraft on the floor of the classroom. I used to train something to cabin crew which was absolutely baffling. It was called a 'Service Flow' and it was mind blowingly complicated. I will attempt to explain briefly now and then see if you make it to the end of the sentence alive.

There are so many doors on an aircraft. There is one or even two people that are assigned to door positions. Depending on whether they are sat nearest the window or furthest away they will work a different bit of the cabin. So, when I was learning this flow of service, I remember my instructor asking me, 'So, if L2 is working with L4 on first drinks as are R2 and R4 – will they be working out of Galley 2/3 or 3/5 which of course depends on the aircraft type and also what would be L4X be doing at this time?!!!'

'Um, in the toilet?' 'I don't know – sorry.'

Now the answer probably seems obvious to you!

When you confront people with this type of abbreviated stuff, it closes their brains down. I find that people can cope with about two abbreviations in a session and then after that they are translating the abbreviations as you are moving on to the next one. This leads to intense curiosity initially, then confusion, then frustration then either they get it or, you lose them for the remainder of the day. Who wants that sort of resentment in the room – not I.

One way I found to help them learn this was to submerge them in it all. I used to give them the very complicated document that was the flow of service with all the numbers and galley positions and direction of service and who does what and when basically. I would say, ‘You have one hour to turn this classroom into an aircraft which includes seating layout, galley positions, even pretend drinks carts. I would then like you to talk me through how all the different positions work by walking me through it and acting it out.’

This worked without fail. It took one hour and thirty minutes start to finish and they got it. Previously, I would have spent hours going through it time and time again as people could not visualise how it work from a piece of laminated paper with abbreviations all over it.

Part of the reason why this worked so well is covered in the next couple of tips.

Tip 3 – Motion = emotion

Get them moving about. If for no other reason than it is a killer to just sit there for hours looking at technical stuff. Some people can do it but they are rare.

Are there ways that you could get people to do a scavenger hunt to find clues or answers to problems that you have posed for them?

If you are using a process that has to be learned exactly as it is with no deviations, why not try this idea. Take each part of the process and break it up. Give each bit to a person who is part of the group. Line them up in order of the process. Ask them to look around at each other and identify who is what part. Labels on each of them help to re-enforce the message. Use lots of repetition to help them learn it such as, 'So if Graham is the beginning, who is next and why and then who...?'

Next bit. Ask them to go to the walls and then when you blow a whistle, to get back together in the right order and explain why. It works and I don't really know why.

Other things that you can do involve reviewing it by miming or quizzes 'Millionaire style' or throw bits of rolled up paper at each with questions that the other person must answer. Maybe, make up a song or rhyme that covers the main points. Music is a very powerful way to get the messages to stick.

Tip 4 – VHF

This next tip of what could be many (word limit prohibits) is the term of VHF which comes from John Townsend* called Visual, hearing and feeling.

It refers to a very simple idea and that is to make your training come alive by involving more of the senses. For example, if you are training a product, let them touch it, smell it, play with it, use it, discuss it or even eat it. There is nothing that makes it more memorable than this as they are taking in the information more ways that PowerPoint can ever hope to deliver.

Visual ideas

- **Make visual aids big, bold and beautiful.**
- **Pictures around the room**
- **Products to see in the room**
- **Interesting facts on the wall**
- **Huge crosswords on the wall with key bits about the course for them to find the answers**
- **Do lots of demos of the product and its uses**

Hearing ideas

- **Play tapes of people using the product**
- **Give them case studies to discuss**
- **Do lecture style input in short blasts with time for reviewing afterwards**
- **Quizzes work well for this as they hear the answers being spoken by the group.**
- **Ask them to review on their own using a learning log or similar**
- **Use Socratic questioning which allows them to solve it themselves with guiding funnel type questions from the trainer until they get to the point that you hoped they would arrive at.**

Feeling ideas

- **Let them touch the product and play with it**
- **Give them opportunity to move around the room**
- **Give them the pre-quiz and post-quiz idea. Give them the workbooks and a quiz to do straight after the course introductions. Encourage them to 'cheat' by finding the answers from the workbooks in groups of 3 or 4.**

- **Build collaboration into the sessions so that they work with others and then will build up confidence to ask the ‘silly questions’ without feeling daft to others.**
- **Let them create ways to remember the material e.g. Draw posters, create a song, decorate a white t-shirt etc**
- **Tell stories that create feelings in the listener.**

A quick note on these channels. If you ask people what they remember from the course it will be: The things they did (feeling channel); a particular thing they liked the look of such as a cartoon on a visual aid (visual channel); A funny story someone said (mixture of feeling and hearing); that horrible role play (feeling); that top tip (hearing).

It is never, ever, ‘oh, that fantastic PowerPoint slide no.3!’

Tip 5 - Memory enhancers = FROLL

This is another taken from John Townsend.* FROLL links to some of the factors that effect recall.

F	First. Memory is particularly good at the beginning of the day or for sessions following a break or when there is something new introduced. Make the most of them and put your key messages up front.
R	Repeated. Just like at school this technique works very well the more you repeat the key messages. Think about adverts on the T.V. and how often they repeat what they want you to remember.
O	Outstanding. The unusual and odd things stand out. So do funny stories or just stories linked to content.
L	Linked. Anything that is linked to things they already know or links they make or you make during the day. If you can link your scary content to everyday things that really affect them, there is more chance it will go in.
L	Last. The ends of events or sessions tend to be good times to re-enforce key messages. When the trainer says, 'So, in a minute we will be breaking for coffee, but before we do...' This comment will bring most out of their trainee slumber to allow them enough consciousness to stagger out of the room to the coffee station.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to introduce some fun, make it relaxed and help people to learn your products more easily. Some closing thoughts to ponder on. Your goal is the same as theirs' when learning about new products or 'right and wrong' training. That is, to get material in as quickly and as painlessly as possible. To go out of the room feeling they know more than when they arrived.

A friend of mine went on a Wine knowledge course once and he left the room was more confused than when he arrived. He felt that he actually knew less by the end of the day. The only thing that I could conclude from that is that there is a unique breed of trainers out there that are actually better skilled at removing knowledge from people's heads than putting it in.

When running product training it can become easy to tell them everything about the subject often beyond what they actually need to know. When we do that it is a bit like the washing machine example. When you have information to convey to people, it is a bit like when you put your washing on. You want to cram everything into the machine but you know that if you do, it won't get covered in water properly. You therefore put less in so that it gets done properly. The same is true of putting information across to people. You need to think to yourself, what is the optimum amount to communicate to make sure I do not overload and everything is covered properly?***

References

*** John Townsend. The Trainer's Pocketbook. Management Pocketbooks 2004.**

**** Colin Corder. Teaching Hard Teaching Soft. Gower 1990.**

***** Alan Evans and Paul Tizzard. Openers and Closers Pocketbook. Management Pocketbooks 2005.**