

Dealing with training difficulties

The best way to prevent difficulties during your training event is to make sure that you recruit the right people, and that you have clearly specified the aims and objectives of the training. Recruiting the right people will make sure that participants have the correct experience and knowledge to prepare them for training so that they will not feel out of their depth or isolated or threatened. You can also check that participants have the right attitude to training (open and participative) and to the panel tasks that you may have for them in future. Specifying the aims and objectives clearly will prevent participants from straying from the purposes of the training or asking many irrelevant questions.

However, you may still encounter some difficulties during the training and you will need to make up your own strategies for dealing with these. The strategies you use should reflect your own training style and should reflect a genuine desire to help participants – not simply wish them to be quiet or to be somewhere else! Remember that you and the participants have invested a lot of time and effort to be at the training so you need to try to deal with any difficulties that a participant might present without alienating them or making them want to leave, or to cause further disruption.

1. What should I do if the training is too long, or not long enough?

If you are delivering a training event for the first time you may not know exactly how long a particular session might take. You may need a plan for if it overruns (what else will you cut down?) or for if it is too short (an extra activity that will consolidate the learning, perhaps?). You may find that the material provokes some very interesting discussion, which you had not anticipated, or that the plenary sessions are very lively and fascinating. Even though you would like to contribute to these discussions, and to allow them to go on for a long time, you must remember the aims and outcomes of the training event. Do not be distracted even by fascinating discussions! Suggest to the participants that they might want to continue the discussion by email – or if you have a 'chat room', this could be used.

There might also be a danger that because you have carefully designed and prepared the training, that you will deliver it all, as written in the programme, whether participants need all the information or not! You may be tempted to stick rigidly to your programme, just because you have put a lot of work into constructing the training. This will not help the participants if you find out, for example, that they are more experienced or knowledgeable than you thought, or if the computer breaks down and you cannot show a clip from the internet. You need to be able to pass on to other material that is more relevant.

So what can you do if you find that you have too much material (or material that turns out not to be relevant) or too little to deliver (perhaps because you were relying on the internet for material and the link does not work)?

First, if you need to adapt your programme as you go along, do not feel that you must tell the participants about this unless they have suggested a change themselves and you want to show that you have responded to that suggestion. Don't give the participants the impression that you do not know what you're doing – it will make

them nervous! If your programme includes periods while the participants are working on their own, or you have breaks, then these are good points to ask yourself whether the programme needs changing and think about what you can leave out without removing the ability of participants to achieve the learning outcomes. Or, if you need to add material, you can look through the additional materials that you have brought with you and decide what is most appropriate and what fits the time gap. Because you can never be absolutely certain how training will be received it makes sense always to build in some breaks (even just 5 minutes) to give yourself the opportunity to tweak or adapt the delivery if you need to.

If you are working with another trainer then one trainer can think about whether the training needs adapting – and keep a watchful eye on the participants' reactions - while another is delivering.

If you have seriously misjudged the timing of the event you may find that you do not have time to deliver enough material to enable all the learning outcomes to be achieved. This is a serious state of affairs and the reason that you should be as prepared as possible beforehand is to try to make sure that this does not happen.

However, if you are unlucky (perhaps a fire alarm went off and the room had to be evacuated), you will need to deal with the situation. Look at the programme and decide which of the learning outcomes could be delivered later - perhaps online or by an email correspondence. Any session which is mainly just a PowerPoint delivery would be appropriate – as long as it did not contain information which was necessary for a later session in the training.

Again, it is essential that you have thought about this beforehand, so that you know which sessions you could miss out completely in an emergency. If you have to do this, explain it calmly to the participants and tell them how you will enable them to achieve the learning outcome another way. If you say that you will send them information by email, tell them the date by which you will do this.

Making big changes to the programme in this way are really emergency reactions. If you have prepared properly, and you know your participants, all you should need to do during the programme is make small 'tweaks'.

2. How do I deal with people who ask questions all the time?

You may find that you have people who ask questions all the time. This might reflect the fact that they do not have the correct background knowledge to make use of the training. Or if you gave out pre-training work, they might not have completed that work. Or they might just be very enthusiastic about the subject and have a lot to contribute.

Obviously, you want to encourage participants to participate in the training, and asking questions is one way of doing that, but if it starts to take up too much time, or the participant is asking questions that are of no interest or use to other participants, then you need to deal with the situation.

Remind the whole group of participants that you have certain materials and activities that you need to work through together, so you can only deal with the questions which are relevant to the training. Offer to deal with other questions during the breaks (if you have breaks) or after the training, perhaps by phone or email. I

f you offer to do this you must make sure that you keep your promise or you will lose credibility with your participants. Assuming that you do not wish to spend long hours on email or the phone, you will see why it is important to recruit the right participants and to make the aims and outcomes of training clear!

3. What do I do about people who disagree with me?

There may be participants who disagree with what you are saying, and will say so openly in the training event. First of all, always allow for the fact that they may be right! You are not infallible and however well you prepare you might make a mistake during delivering material, or one of your participants might have some up-to-date information which could correct or amend what you are saying.

Always accept criticism graciously. If you can deal with it quickly during the training, do so. If not, inform the participant that you will think about it later. If the participant is criticising you and you know that the criticism is unwarranted or given in a rude manner then you will need to speak to the participant to find out why he/she is behaving in such a manner and decide whether you can help the participant to take a more constructive attitude. Do this privately with the participant. If the person is being really disruptive and your training programme is short you might need to call for a 5 minute break for everyone so that you can talk to the critical participant discretely. Otherwise your training could be disrupted completely.

Most people you train will not set out deliberately to make life difficult for you. Usually there are reasons why people behave in a difficult way – they may feel threatened by all the clever people in the room; they may be tired or worried about their day job; they may be feeling guilty because they have not done the preparatory work. If you can help the participant to lay these considerations on one side for a short time and try to enjoy the training, then you may find that the difficulties go away.

4. What do I do if people are not paying attention?

You may see people texting or leaving the room to take frequent phone calls. If you are allowing participants to use lap tops some people might be reading work documents while you are speaking.

Before the training stress to would-be participants that they must be able to leave their day job behind, at least while sessions in the training room are taking place. If they really must, then participants could use the breaks to contact their office or work. But on the whole it is a good thing to use the breaks for relaxing and networking, so make sure that you set that expectation before training. Some training groups add these expectations to their ground rules: no use of mobile phones in the training room; concentrating on the training activities while in the training room; etc.

5. How do I deal with people who do not take part?

You may find that some people are shy or embarrassed about joining small groups, work-pairs or practical activities. Again, you should be honest with participants before the training that you will expect them to take part in such activities, and that the activities are designed to prepare them for similar activities in panel work.

During the training event let participants know that everyone is in the same position, and that the training is a learning activity. Make sure that you give participants enough information to know how to carry out group or practical activities, and be prepared to facilitate groups if they do not seem to know what to do. Also encourage group members to help and support each other. Congratulate groups when they have done well.

6. What if people in small groups do not get on with one another?

If your training event involves small group work it is possible that some of the participants in the group may not get on with one another and the work of the group may be disrupted. If the training extends for a significant length of time, and the participants stay in the same groups, this could potentially cause problems for you.

The best way to deal with the problem is to ask the group to reflect on the situation, identify the problem, and see whether it can produce a solution for itself. In real life, panel members will be working in groups for their panel activities and they will not usually choose who they work with, so they need to be able to get along with a variety of people.

Each group member will need to have their own strategy for working in a group or team, and this may be one of the things that you ask them to reflect on and produce an action point for at the end of the training event. If you frequently encounter problems with group work you may want to include a specific session on team-working in the training.

And some tips:

- For participants with a lot of energy who may want to be the centre of attention: ask them to help with organizing tasks or logistical matters; remind them that you would like to hear from everyone; you could answer some of their questions by saying to the whole room, „Let’s hear what others think about that.“
- If a participant is not joining in, try using an exercise which expects an answer from everyone and go around the room, asking each person to reply briefly in turn. If some people are very shy you could give them a few minutes to write down the answer first.
- If a person is voicing very negative opinions about aspects of the training ask if he/she is willing to suggest a practical alternative; ask other members of the group what they think and whether they also have alternatives.
- If a participant is behaving rudely or aggressively towards others: remind him/her that the training is about a process, not about the other people in the room; the participant’s comments should be confined to the training material. If you have a ground rule about courtesy or respect, remind the participant of this.
- In all cases where a person is behaving in a difficult way, manage the situation in the training room as best as you can and then in the next break you have, discuss the issue with the participant on his/her own.