



The Importance of Climate in Training

by Eric Baron

When training programs don't succeed, we all too often blame the results on the group or on the time constraints or on the external factors that got in the way. Sometimes we even blame the course content and take some of the responsibility ourselves for the results. What we don't consider often enough, I'm afraid, is what the climate for learning was like during the program and what its impact was on the group. This is unfortunate because if there is one thing we can look for when training programs do not accomplish their objectives, it is the climate that prevailed during the session. And if there is anything trainers can control, it is this climate.

When we talk about the climate we are referring to how it feels to be a participant in the training program and what kind of a mood exists among the people in the room. Climate addresses things like how people listen to each other, how ideas are treated, how questions are used, how much fun the group is having and how the "vibes" in the room feel. The climate begins to be established from the minute the first participant walks into the room, and it can change at any time until the session is completed.

Everything the trainer does and every approach he or she uses will in some way impact the climate. That is why as trainers we must be ultra sensitive to how our actions affect the climate of the program. Here are some thoughts on what you can do as a trainer to create a healthy climate in your training sessions.

Conduct warm-up exercises

I cannot imagine starting a training program without conducting a round of introductions. I don't care how well everyone knows each other and how long they have worked together, it is important for everyone to hear the sound of his/her own voice early in the program and to learn about the non-work side of their fellow trainees. Adding something novel to the intros will always add to the experience.

For example, asking people to tell the group something about themselves that would surprise the group, or something unusual that happened to them recently, or what they would like to be doing if they weren't here, are among the hundreds of ways you can have fun during introductions while starting to build a healthy climate among the group. In a multi-day program conducting a warm-up exercise each morning is a fun way to start the day.

Create an environment where speculation is encouraged

When people guess at possible answers and feel comfortable taking risks, they make more connections and are willing to stretch themselves. It is the trainer's responsibility to establish the climate that allows this to happen. Right answers are important, but if people don't guess from time to time, you will miss the opportunity for some valuable connection making. All you have to do is make a participant feel foolish for speculating once, and you will hamper that effort from that time on.

Be a role model

The trainer who forces him or herself to find value in whatever participants say when ideas are being shared demonstrates for the group that there is an upside to virtually anything anyone chooses to share. As participants in the program observe you working hard to see what you can get from a comment, they will be likely to do the same. If you're willing to look at things from a different perspective, they may also. If you demonstrate good listening, they may just follow suit. If you are willing to give up air time, they may do the same. If you respect the time allocated for breaks, so will they. If you take risks, they might consider taking one or two themselves. And if you look like you are enjoying yourself, they may just have a good time as well.

Be sensitive and empathetic

A nurturing training environment where learning happens through discovery can be a wonderful experience. It won't happen if you aren't tuned in to what is happening between and among the members of the group. You are in fact the traffic cop for the session, and in this facilitative role you have to be the one to protect ideas and the participants themselves. Establishing some ground rules early such as "no killer statements" and getting buy-in will make it easier to do this. I can't think of a better way

to ruin the climate in a session than making a participant feel foolish for having made a contribution.

Use a facilitative approach

That means encouraging people to offer their ideas and learn from each other as opposed to you providing all the information. Obviously, there are times when lectures or direct input is necessary. However, don't fall into the trap of the group learning at the "foot of the master," which is not a terrific way for people to learn, nor is it a way to increase the likelihood of people remembering what was covered in the program.

Have fun

I don't care how dry the material is that you are teaching, there is always a way to develop an exercise or involve the group in some activity that will result in their making connections, learning something new and enjoying themselves at the same time. That doesn't mean the session has to turn into a yuck session, but it does mean lightening things up a bit from time to time.

Deal with the bad actors

Fortunately, it doesn't happen too often, but there are those cases where one person in the group will have an impact on the training program. It only takes one, as you know, and the impact can be devastating. First of all don't give that person too much attention. That is what he or she wants and the tendency is to give that person lots of attention at the expense of those who want to learn. I have seen cases where one person got as much as half the instructor's attention while the other eleven people who were anxious to hear what she had to say had to fight for the time that was left.

Secondly, talk to the person one-on-one. There is no reason to take him or her on in front of the group. When you do talk to the person, avoid appearing judgmental and talk about how he or she is impacting the group as opposed to their behavior. See if you can get them to commit to doing something a little differently. And perhaps you can make a contract to remind the person if he or she slips into that mode again.

Remember

Climate has very little to do with things like where the location of the session is, what the facility is like, the size of the group, the learning objectives, look of the materials, or the length of the course. Climate is the all important process issue. Climate describes how the session moves along and what it feels like for the participants to be there. If there is one thing to think about before you teach that familiar program for the twenty fifth time, it is what you can do to create a climate that makes the learning experience a positive and memorable event. If you put as much time into planning how to maximize the quality of the climate as you do preparing for the concepts you will teach, your session will have to be more successful.