



# Using Problem-Solving Skills to *Conduct Effective Training Programs*

When a trainer first walks into the classroom, participants invariably wonder about how flexible and open minded he or she will be. Course participants complain regularly that the learning experience would be so much more enjoyable if trainers would be as open

and receptive to their ideas as they ask the participants to be when they present the course material. With this in mind, we suggest that trainers approach their courses with a problem-solving orientation, using proven problem solving skills to facilitate the learning process.

First let's look at a basic problem-solving approach. When we conduct Interactive Innovation™ programs and workshops throughout Ogilvy & Mather, we suggest a basic six-step process – Set the climate; State the problem; Define the problem; Generate alternative approaches; Evaluate the selected areas of interest; and State the solution and next steps. These same six steps can be applied to teaching any specific module.

## **1. Set the Climate**

I'm a big believer in setting the climate as a way to launch each day of a training program whether it lasts a half day or full week. Just as I do when I facilitate problem-solving meetings I ask each participant to engage in a specific exercise before the session begins.

Most trainers do this on the first day and ask participants to talk about their career, specific interests, or whatever. That's standard procedure.

I like to have short kickoffs daily so that people hear the sound of their own voice, interact with the other participants, think creatively whenever possible, and get settled for the day's events.

There are many ways to do this. Some of my favorites include "Tell us about something you like to do that might surprise us" or "What's your highlight of the year." Sometimes we can have fun and ask people to respond to "Who you would like to have dinner with" or "What's your fantasy career."

Sometimes, like on the last day of a session, we will ask people to answer, “What’s the most important thing you have learned so far?” or “What do you hope we cover today that hasn’t been discussed yet?” The intent is to set a climate for the day that is upbeat, fun, risk free and challenging.

## **2. State the Problem or Opportunity**

When introducing a concept or skill set it is critical to explain why we have included this particular module or subject in the course. If we’re teaching listening skills, for example, we can introduce the discussion by providing statistics about how little people retain in conversations or how our clients consider listening to be of utmost importance. If we are introducing a module about idea generation techniques we will get the group talking about what happens when they run out of ideas or if they aren’t pleased with the ideas they develop. When we introduce a management skill like coaching it’s important for the group to identify why coaching is such a critical management skill and why managers tend to avoid and resist it.

The key is to let the group know what the problem is that we need to resolve or what opportunity exists that we want to pursue so they will approach the module eager to hear what we are about to say. In short, we’re explaining why the module we are about to teach is important for them.

## **3. Defining the Problem/Opportunity**

Just as we would approach a problem-solving meeting, we need to define the problem or opportunity before addressing it with specific ideas and recommendations. To define the subject it makes good sense to involve the group so they feel it’s relevant to their world, and at the same time, provide them with a sense of ownership regarding the issue.

Staying with one of the previous examples, let’s assume we’re talking about listening. A way to involve the group is to get them to speculate why it’s so difficult to listen. As we generate a “Barriers to listening” list we start to define the problem but at the same time we demonstrate that many of these barriers are the result of positive intentions.

For example, an account person might not hear what clients are saying because they’re too busy trying to solve the problem. The intention is to help; the result could be a missed opportunity. When groups realize that a skill deficiency is coming from a good place, they are much more willing to hear about how they can improve; consequently, their receptiveness to learn increases dramatically.

Once the group has provided its perspectives it becomes the trainer's responsibility to offer additional insight. In the listening example, the trainer would now illustrate why these barriers exist.

In our programs we use the Carl Rogers Rehearsal Curve model to demonstrate what happens to listening over time. We support that with specific data like how the rate at which we think is much greater than the rate at which we speak, how our attention span can be as short as 50 seconds in a problem solving meeting, or how people tend to save their most important thoughts until the end of their message when the listener has tuned out. All the time I think it's most helpful if participants understand that what we're saying is consistent with many of their perceptions; it never hurts to credit them in order to continue to involve them in the learning process.

#### **4. Generating Alternative Approaches**

The fun part of problem solving is generating ideas just like the fun part of training is often teaching new skills. As we introduce new skills, we suggest presenting them in the same way we would ask people to present ideas in a problem-solving meeting. We don't want to sell the idea; we don't want to force it; we don't want to be pushy and we certainly don't want to be inflexible.

We suggest that you demonstrate how the skill being introduced can address the needs that are identified or solve the problem introduced or take advantage of the opportunity highlighted. We want the skill to become the answer to issues that were raised by the group when the problem was introduced and defined.

It helps considerably when what is offered complements what the group suggested. And, in many situations, the skills are things that many people want to do – they're just not sure about what the approach should be. So, if I'm introducing concepts like active listening, note taking, maintaining objectivity, paraphrasing or reflective listening as ways to address the barriers to listening,

I want to ensure that the group makes the connection as to how the concepts we introduce can resolve the issues. In doing so, our thoughts will always be accepted more readily if we allow the group to make the connections themselves.

## 5. Evaluation

Now it's time for the group to evaluate the idea. Unfortunately, many participants react to new skills and concepts similarly to how a problem owner reacts to new and different ideas. That reaction too often is what we might characterize as "unresponsive."

This is when the professional trainer can use his or her facilitation skills to resolve the issue. Flexibility becomes a critical behavior for trainers at this time, and the willingness to let people learn, as opposed to showing them how to do it, is the challenge we face.

Let's never forget we have all been somewhat "programmed" to react negatively to new and different ideas. The first word we understood was "no." The first tests we took came back telling us how many answers were wrong. The first composition we wrote was returned with red marks under the mistakes. As we developed as adults, we learned to look for what was wrong with an idea as opposed to why it might work. This tendency presents itself often in the training room, and it's our job to make sure that it doesn't keep people from learning.

We will be more successful in our attempt to resolve the potential conflict if we use the same skills a process facilitator uses in a problem-solving meeting. If a hot idea is on the table and someone attempts to discredit it the facilitator will step in.

If someone complains that the solution will take too long to implement, for example, the facilitator will intercede and ask the group to figure out how we can get the solution implemented in less time. In doing so the facilitator helps turn the concern into an opportunity or an "invitation" for ideas as opposed to a road block we can't overcome. Similarly, the trainer can use this approach with a recalcitrant participant in a training program. If the participant resists, the trainer ideally would draw out the concern as opposed to becoming defensive or aggressive.

Next, she would "reframe" the concern and turn it into a need or opportunity. Then she would go to the group for ideas to address it or offer ideas herself to resolve it. She could also ask the participant for a thought or two.

Using such a conflict resolution model will help the participant see the value and either accept the ideas or at least realize it will work for other people in specific ways. And the trainer will demonstrate that he or she is open minded and willing to work with resistant participants to alleviate their concerns.

## **6. State Solution/Next Steps**

In problem-solving meetings we typically ask the problem owner to express what his or her understanding of the idea is, and if it meets certain criteria we call it a solution and develop next steps. As we do this, the problem owner demonstrates the commitment he or she feels towards the solution.

In training programs, we suggest that the participants' next step is to practice the use of the skill. With that in mind, I typically give participants the opportunity to practice the skills we teach in role plays, skills drills, written exercises or group exercises. This closes the loop and further demonstrates the value of the skill.

In debriefing the exercise the trainer can deal with additional questions and concerns and move towards closure.

It's never a waste of time to ask people how they intend to use the skill to see if any skepticism still exists and thereby get a sense of their commitment of the solution. People learn best when they are free to determine for themselves the value of an idea, skill, concept, technique or process.

By bringing a problem-solving mentality to the training situation, trainers can play a more significant role in helping people learn new and different approaches to their jobs.

At the same time, we provide them with the opportunity to make decisions for themselves as to how what they have learned can make them more effective in their day-to-day activities. And as we use an approach like this, we demonstrate the behavior we are asking of them, and we are in fact practicing what we preach. That, in itself, will lead to more productive, useful, and enjoyable training experiences.

### **A Basic Problem-Solving Approach:**

1. Set the climate
2. State the problem
3. Define the problem
4. Generate alternatives
5. Evaluate selected ideas
6. State solution/next steps