9 Best Practices That Will Boost the Effectiveness of Your Training

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Plenty has been written about why training fails, why executives don't see the value, or why agents leave before they're ever ready to step on the floor and take their first call. While we can learn a lot from what doesn't work, there's even more to learn when we focus on what *does* works in training. This e-book, which features a collection of articles written by Elaine Carr, group instructional design manager at ICMI and HDI, highlights nine different training techniques that have been proven to work, along with concrete examples for using each technique in contact center training.

Ready to develop and deliver more effective curriculum and improve the ROI of your training program? Keep reading and get ready to take notes! This e-book should serve as a guide and a source of inspiration, and it will work best if you take the time to complete the action items included.

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Best Practice #1: **Use All 5 Senses**

Over the last few years, there's been quite a bit of buzz around what *doesn't* work in training: learning styles, left-right brain thinking, formal learning objectives at the beginning of training, and a long list of other "facts" that aren't really facts at all. Learning styles seem to be one of the hardest training myths to debunk; so many people have invested their time and energy into changing their instructional design and delivery to accommodate different learning styles—and they may even think they've seen those learning styles work. On the bright side, there are some helpful takeaways from the learning styles movement.

One of the most practical takeaways is the practice of engaging multiple senses in learning and training. We do know that the more senses we use to learn something, the easier it is to remember. We also know that telling people information alone does not mean that they understand it or remember it, much less know how to use it on the job.

When you're training in the contact center, you should be utilizing a variety of activities that involve hearing, speaking, touching, seeing, and, when possible, even smelling. When learners are listening to information, they should also be doing something with that information: taking notes, constructing a concept map, looking for specific information, analyzing the good and the bad, stopping to reflect on what is most important, and sharing the information with others. If nothing else, they should be listening and thinking, "How can I use this information on the job?"

You can help learners use all of their senses by presenting information in multiple formats and activities and short chunks.

For instance, in a former company, we had a new client that took orders for vitamins over the phone, which meant agents had to use a lot of big words, some of which weren't familiar. I realized this while listening to a sample call from the client where the agent mispronounced the word "cholesterol." It may seem like a common term, but you don't always recognize words in writing that you've only heard. To help solve the problem, I made a list of 25 difficult words that agents would have to use frequently, and then I designed different ways to work with the words over time.

We began working on pronunciation on the second day of training. On the first pronunciation day, I had a slide for each word that included the definition and a voice pronouncing the word. We played the voice file (you can easily find these with a quick Google search) three times, and the learners would repeat the pronunciation after the recording. We also included the guidance on a note-taking guide where participants could make notes about pronunciation.

On the second day, each word had its own slide with the pronunciation diagrammed on the screen (rather than a voice file). The learners would pronounce each word together three times, and then they worked together to define each word.

On the third day, each word had a slide with no pronunciation clues and the team said each word aloud three times. With a partner, they then had to write sentences containing the words that they might use on a call. By this time, they were familiar with the products and the order process, so they were ready to incorporate the words into what they'd be doing each day.

For the rest of the course, we didn't have a daily drill, but we were using the words daily in scripts and role plays. By the time the agents were on the phones, they knew each of the problematic words and had no problems pronouncing or using them correctly.

The training included seeing (seeing the words on the screen and the pronunciation diagrams), speaking (saying the words each day), hearing (the words pronounced from a voice file, and they could listen to fellow learners pronounce the words), and doing (writing down pronunciation notes, definitions, and using the phrase in realistic sentences). I didn't involve any smelling in that training session, but I did use all of the rest of our five senses.

How could you better use all five senses in your training curriculum? Brainstorm and capture your ideas in the space below.

Best Practice #2: Chunk Content

Often in contact center training, the trainer dumps heaps of content on learners. The trainer conveys information verbally, perhaps with a slide presentation, or through piles of handouts, worksheets, and text. I liken this to pouring a pitcher of water (the content the learners need to know) over their heads. The problem is that not much of that content is going to stick, just like only some of the water will be absorbed through their skin, hair, and clothing—and the water in the hair and clothing is eventually going to evaporate and disappear. It's only the tiny bit of water (content) that gets absorbed through the surface of the skin that will stick with the learner. Everything else is runoff or evaporation. In training, this approach leaves participants overwhelmed, and they only remember a small percentage of the content.

Likewise, you could hold the pitcher of water over the learners' open mouths and pour it in, but there's a reason why waterboarding is a form of torture. While more of the content (or water) will get into the participants, it is most likely to make them ill rather than help the content stick with them.

No, what we should do is pour the water into glasses and let the learners sip the water until it's all been consumed. With content, we do that by chunking. Chunking is about dividing the content into shorter bits of no more than 10-20 minutes and then having the learners do something with the material before adding any more.

Why 10-20 minutes and not 30-50 minutes? For one thing, commercials appear in TV shows about every eight minutes, and we've gotten accustomed to having mental breaks or shifts in action that frequently. But the main reason is to avoid cognitive overload. Our brains can only handle so much information in our working memory. Once we reach that limit, some information has to move into long-term memory or new information is just not retained at all. Since working memory can only hold new details for up to a minute, our brains are continually moving information into long-term memory. Chunking helps reinforce this activity and move content deeper into long-term memory.

The capacity of memory differs based on the previous familiarity with content and the complexity of the material. Therefore, more complex content should be delivered in smaller chunks, as should content that is entirely unfamiliar to participants. Refresher training can be done in slightly larger chunks, but you should always follow the 10-20 minutes guideline.

At this point, you might be skeptical about your ability to deliver all the content you need to teach in 10-20 minutes. First, consider whether you need to provide all of the content you're planning to share. Do the participants need to know everything there is to know about a new system, about the history of your company, or every conceivable situation they might encounter? Probably not—at least not immediately. What do they need to know to perform their jobs? Once you have identified the need-to-know content, you should only cover what they need to know now. The nice-to-know information or interesting information can be put into a handout or on a knowledge base for learners to pick up on their own later.

Once you've determined which content is essential, you still need to know what to do every 10-20 minutes. My favorite activity is what author and trainer Sharon Bowman calls "one-minute review activities." A one-minute review activity is a short activity that calls for each participant to pause, think back on what was just covered, and process it in some way. Here are some examples:

1. **Have learners turn to the person next to/behind them and share the most important thing they heard in the last 10 minutes.**

2. **Ask learners to write a one-sentence summary of what you just covered and share it with their neighbor.**

3. **Have learners review their notes and circle the three most important takeaways. Then have them compare with a neighbor.**

4. **Ask for a number between 1 and 5, and then have the class shout out that number of items about the topic just covered.**

5. **Have learners stand and stretch their arms to the ceiling, then tell their neighbor the most important thing they just heard in the content. (This is also a great way to get the blood moving a little and getting oxygen to the brain.)**

6. **Ask learners to explain to a partner how this information will help them on the job.**

7. **Have participants make up a test question based on the material and then write the question and answer on opposite sides of an index card. (You can then collect these to use in a future class.)**

8. **Have learners work with a partner to make a list of everything they now know about the topic.**

9. **Ask true or false questions about the material just covered and have participants respond with a signal—a thumbs up or down, a clap or a foot stomp, holding up a green or a red card, etc. Doing this can also help you determine if you need to clarify or repeat any content.**

These activities only have to take one or two minutes. And I also want to point out that they do not involve much interaction with the trainer. Not everything has to go through the trainer. Sharing just with one or two people sitting nearby is sufficient, and often the small group will self-correct any misconceptions, or at least bring them up as questions to the trainer and class. If everybody has to share with everyone else in the class, one by one by one, it will take a lot longer and put some people's minds back to sleep. Avoid doing that. Just listen in, circulate, and notice what is going on during the activity.

Of course, you still want to do longer application practices of the material, but that doesn't have to happen every 10-20 minutes. I like to string together three to five related chunks, doing a different one-minute activity between each, and then a more extended concrete practice after the string of chunks. And I try hard to keep my chunks as close to 10 minutes as possible, leaving room for when I have underestimated timing, or when participant questions and reactions make things go longer.

Chunking makes a class more interactive, keeps participants accountable for their learning, and avoids wasting training time due to cognitive overload. It's a technique that allows participants to sip at the content over time, absorbing it more thoroughly and retaining it longer. Try it out if you aren't doing it already, and use the space below to jot down your ideas for creative one-minute review activities.

Best Practice #3: Align Context

So far, we've discussed using multiple senses in training and chunking the content. Next, let's cover the importance of *context alignment* in learning.

Context alignment means that learning happens in a physical context that is as close as possible to the environment in which people will be expected to perform. You should make contact center training as much like being on the contact center floor as possible, while practicing the skills the participants will use on the job.

Classroom training is still viable, especially for accumulating the knowledge participants will need to do the job. However, a Godden & Baddeley study on context-dependent memory uncovered that divers who studied flashcards underwater recalled them more effectively underwater than on land. The results indicate that **there is 50% more recall if learning and recall context are the same,** which means that even in accumulating knowledge, context alignment has a significant impact on recall and learning transfer.

When it comes to applying knowledge in specific situations, aligning the practice context with the workplace context will especially help the participants transfer their learning to the workplace. One area where context alignment is especially critical in contact center training is role playing. Most classroom role playing happens in one of two ways:

1. **Participants pair up with someone in the class and take turns being the customer and the agent.**
2. **Participants are divided in groups of three, with one person playing the agent, one the customer, and the third the observer, switching roles between each role play. They may or may not have situations given to them to use in role playing. The role play is conducted in front of the entire class.**

Neither of these scenarios seem very realistic. In the pairs or triads situation, participants sit around looking at each other and at the agent's computer to see just what the agent sees and each other's body language. When the person playing the agent gets stumped, I've even seen the "customer" reach across and show them where to look or what to say. That doesn't happen on the contact center floor.

In the scenario where the instructor is playing the customer, the participant playing the agent becomes self-conscious performing before so many people, which is also not what they have to do on the floor. Furthermore, other participants get bored when they're not the agent themselves, and the class loses the benefit of seeing the interaction through the eyes of the customer since they never get to play the role of the customer.

I suggest that the participant playing the customer in a role-playing situation should only know as much as any customer calling in, and they should never volunteer advice or see what the agent sees on their screen. If the agent gets stumped or has a problem, they should turn to a supervisor or trainer for help, just as they would during a real call. And the "customer" should act like customers do and get irritated or upset at delays or wrong answers, escalating the contact if the situation calls for it. A customer does not sit quietly on the other end of the phone while the agent fumbles for an answer or clicks around their screen for several minutes, and we shouldn't do that in training either.

I would go still further to align the training context with the workplace context. At the very least, the agent and the customer should sit with their backs to each other so that they cannot see body language and the "customer "cannot see the computer screens. Better yet, have the agent set up with a headset that can be dialed into and have the customer dial in. It's indeed a much more challenging experience hearing someone talking over headphones than hearing their voice in the room.

The workstations in training should be set up like the workstations on the floor, and role players should have to navigate systems just like they will have to do on the floor. If you can use a "training" system that's just like the live system, that's ideal, although it probably limits your customer scenarios to what's available in the training system. If you don't have a training system to use, then you might have to use the live system and go back and make sure that all of the customer records used have not been altered inappropriately.

Of course, we don't have to be restricted to making everything exactly like it is on the floor. Sometimes in beginning stages of training, certain skills are focused upon in isolation from other skills to develop them more, adding in additional skills as competency increases. Then we might practice with less context alignment and insert more context alignment as more abilities are mastered.

I once created a baseball game to teach agents how to use the system to identify and resolve customer issues. I created 70 slides using real customer phone calls (with actual records). I also added in some fun sound effects from baseball games. I was a little fearful that it would be too corny, but something wonderful and unexpected happened: when the person "at bat" heard "Play ball!" they were supposed to respond with their greeting just as if they had heard a whisper tone or the call was rung into their workstation. Some people froze like deer in the headlights and couldn't get their greeting out. That's the same thing that happens on the floor when some people get their first live phone call. It was an excellent way to overcome that first, immobilizing fear. Few expect to completely blank when they first take a call, so people learned a little about themselves and how they should prepare for that first call.

Ultimately, your training will be more effective if you can match the environment the learner will face on the job. Doing so creates less fear and strangeness to overcome and more feelings of familiarity and confidence when agents get on the floor. The baseball game wasn't aligned with the workplace context, but it worked anyway since it focused on getting new agents to think on their feet and respond to customers. We did move on to more realistic role playing, but the baseball game was a foundational step towards reality.

Take a look at your training and identify areas where the training could be more realistic and more closely aligned with the workplace context. Capture some notes in the space below.

Best Practice #4: Guide Attention

Guiding learners' attention to what is most important is a research-backed technique that improves the effectiveness of training. This may seem obvious on the surface, but how we guide attention makes all the difference.

One of the traditional ways that trainers indicate something is important is by creating learning objectives and presenting them at the beginning of a training session. Personally, my mind tends to go to sleep when I see these formally stated learning objectives, and part of me worries that it will be a dry training session. I have found that many others (secretly) feel the same way.

Dr. Will Thallheimer has a video, "Learning Objectives – A Research-Inspired Odyssey," that covers the value of learning objectives in training. Essentially, he says that keywords in specifically worded, focused objectives can draw learners' attention, but we don't need objectives to do that as there are lots of other ways we can draw attention to what's important. Whew!

As I've redeveloped and updated ICMI training courses, I've done away with the learning objectives. They can still be found in the participant workbook, because sometimes participants need these to report back to someone at the office, but we don't spend time going over the learning objectives in the class. Instead, I've focused on how the course is organized—what topics are covered and when. In some cases, I've also put keywords on the title page for each section of the training to further draw participants' attention to what's most important in that section.

Another technique I've used is asking screening questions to help understand how much participants already know, while drawing attention to what will be most important in training. Of course, you have to carefully craft these questions so that they reflect what's most important. I never understand when, in new-agent training, a question asks for the specific date or place a company was founded. I have yet to hear that question from any caller. Good screening questions should be relevant to the job or desired behavior that you're teaching in training.

Trainers also frequently tell stories about real problems encountered in the contact center and how specific information or techniques either would have helped them or did help them solve the problem. Telling relevant stories is a powerful way to draw people's attention to what is important in training. If they can relate to the problem and see how the content can help them solve the problem, it becomes more important (and thus, more memorable) to them. A trainer can *tell* participants that specific information is important, but participants have to see that it's true by seeing how they can use the material themselves.

Sometimes I'll do this by creating relevant application activities with urgent deadlines. For example, you have 15 minutes to prepare a sales pitch for a particular type of customer. Either the rest of the class, a visitor, or the trainer will then play that customer as the group presents their sales pitch. If the group doesn't focus on what's important to the potential customer and instead gives a lot of factual information about the product/service, the customer isn't likely to make the purchase. This helps the group focus on learning what's important to the customer and on showing how the product/service helps solve the customer's problems rather than focusing on the product/service itself. Through the activity, participants instinctively learn what matters most. Using a deadline to create a sense of urgency also helps the group focus on what's most important.

Repeating information in different ways is another way to signal that something is important. Many years ago, when I taught study skills, I would tell students to put a star next to information in their notes every time the teacher repeated it, even with different words. Then when they reviewed their notes while studying for a test, they'd know that information with the most stars was probably the most important, and they would focus their attention there. Repetition is an excellent tool for bringing people's attention to what is important. When you cover new points or answer questions, point learners back to what you've already covered to show how further information builds on foundational details. By its very nature, foundational knowledge is most important, and repetition (in different ways) helps reinforce that importance.

I love having learners reflect on content and identify for themselves what's most important. When I train, I do one-minute review activities every 10-15 minutes during a presentation. For example, I'll ask participants to mark their notes with the information that's most important to them, tell someone sitting next to them what they most want to remember about the material, create a quiz question on the most important thing just covered, or other similar reflection activities. Since participants will have different needs, different parts of the course will be most important to different people. This type of reflection helps participants identify and reinforce important information for themselves.

There are plenty of other ways to guide participants' attention to what's most important in a training. Jot down some of your ideas below!

Best Practice #5: Use Repetition

Many years ago, when I was fresh out of college, I worked for a private educational company that taught speed reading and study skills. One of our fundamental concepts was expressed as **Repetition + Reinforcement = Retention.** This was our "3 Rs" of learning: **repetition** was about repeating the material; **reinforcement** meant repeating it in different ways; **retention** meant long-term memory of the material. These days, Repetition + Reinforcement are what I mean by repetition—repeating the information in different ways.

It's true that just repeating the same information in precisely the same manner—reading it multiple times, hearing it numerous times, seeing it multiple times—will increase understanding and retention, if the learner pays attention to the repetition. However, if the learner thinks, "I already heard/read/saw this," they might tune out and think about something else. That's where repeating information in different ways becomes helpful. This repetition not only helps the learner pay attention to information that they have already been exposed to, but it can help deepen their understanding as they see the information differently.

Some of the techniques I use to repeat information include:

- **One-minute reviews sprinkled within the content presentation to have people pause and reflect over the material just presented.**
- **For multiple-day courses, utilizing beginning-of-the-day and end-of-the-day review activities—and I do mean activities (that is, ongoing reviews of what was covered the previous day or in the current day). These could be a review relay, metaphor creation, an improvisational teach-back, a ball toss, a graffiti wall, beat the clock races, setting and reflecting on daily learning goals, and many other activities that help learners reflect upon and understand more deeply the content or skills they are learning, including the connections between different content/skills covered.**
- **Not giving out full copies of the presentation but providing note-taking guides to encourage repetition by participants writing their notes.**
- **Practice using knowledge and skills through role plays, tests, games, puzzles, and application activities.**

- **Telling stories that help create better understanding and retention and doing activities where the participants have to create the stories as well.**

- **Bringing in experts who are familiar with the knowledge/skills to share their experiences and help participants see more clearly how they will use the content in the workplace.**

- **Action planning at the end of any training session where participants have to think back about what was covered and select a limited number of items that they want to remember and use back on the job, with specifics on how they'll do that.**

One of the biggest mistakes inexperienced trainers make is believing that if they've covered the material, the participants have learned it. Just telling people something or having them read it—especially in the middle of a lot of content—rarely sticks very long with anyone. To help learning stick, repetition in a variety of different ways is one of the most essential tools a trainer has.

What is your favorite way to utilize repetition in training? Which of the ideas above might work well in your contact center? Use the space below to reflect on this section.

Best Practice #6: Use Retrieval Techniques

With this next research-proven training method—*retrieval practice*—we shift focus from getting information into people's minds to getting information out of people's minds. In reality, training needs to be a balance between exposing people to new information (i.e., processes, systems, techniques, strategies, etc.) and helping them use that information to do their jobs better.

Training sometimes forgets about learning transfer to the job and focuses solely on the exposure—as if it's the participant's failing if they don't remember information the trainer covered. No, it's not. The primary reason we conduct training is to help participants improve their on-the-job performance. Retrieval practice helps us remember this.

The most common form of retrieval practice is tests and quizzes, but it also takes the form of scenarios, simulations, role playing, reviews, games, flashcards, and any other activity that prompts participants to pull information from their memories. The beginning-of-the-day review activity that causes participants to reflect and recall essential points from the previous day's instruction and the end-of-the-day review activity focusing on that day's important aspects are excellent examples of retrieval practices that go beyond tests and quizzes.

One of my favorite retrieval practices is a one-minute review activity, which I've discussed in previous sections of this guide. One form is to use signals to indicate answers to questions. For instance, make a statement and have everyone hold their thumbs-up if it's true and thumbs-down if it's false. Better yet, give every participant a set of index cards that have colors or letters on them and have them hold up the card that corresponds to the correct answer to your question. If you want to use an inexpensive individual "whiteboard" for each participant, you can place a piece of paper or cardboard in a page protector and have participants use dry erase markers on the outside of the page protector. Participants hold up their answer for the trainer to see and then erase and reuse the same protector throughout training. This gives the trainer a better view of whether participants "get it" or not, allowing the trainer and participants to go back and review information as needed.

A few critical points about conducting retrieval practices:

1. **Feedback is essential** for good retrieval practice. Participants need to know if their retrieval was successful or not, and it if wasn't, why not? That helps them build good retrieval routes to correct information. The more immediate the feedback, the better.

2. Retrieval practice should **engage all participants,** not just one participant who's called upon for an answer.

3. The best retrieval practice **happens at spaced-out intervals over time.** Research shows that even a few repetitions spread over time can increase retention by 100% or more. Build upon each day's learning in a multi-day course. Go back and ask people questions the day after training is completed, and the next day, and the day after that as well. Send out emails with items to be completed and returned, and ask the same questions, or variations thereof, for several days. Do a multi-day scavenger hunt where participants have to provide answers to uncover the next clue that leads to some reward. Be sure to give feedback each day so that the correct information is practiced. It is an old saying, but it's true: "Practice makes perfect."

4. Retrieval practice should **focus on important information.** Do agents really need to remember what year the company was founded? I've not heard very many calls where that's come up, and it's generally fairly easy information to look up on the company website if it does come up. On the other hand, agents probably *do* need to know how to handle an irate customer or the process to follow to complete various regular activities.

5. Retrieval practice should be **aligned with the job context.** The more similar to job circumstances, the more effective the retrieval practice will be in transferring to the job.

6. Retrieval practice **doesn't always have to be a test with a score.** It can and should be conducted regularly with some creative activities that engage all participants in practice and not just a single participant in the hot seat answering a question.

7. Retrieval practice with **appropriate job context cues and feedback increases long-term retention** of content while improving participants' thinking and application skills, the organization of knowledge, and the transfer of knowledge to new concepts. Thus, it improves not only their memory of the content but also their understanding, which is a primary step in transferring learning to the workplace.

Spacing out retrieval practice at regular intervals helps reinforce the retrieval routes, making it faster and easier to remember and understand. Remember, retrieval practice is not just getting information *into* participants' minds but more about getting information out and used appropriately on the job.

Best Practice #7: Make It Challenging

> Often, trainers shy away from making course work too challenging for learners. They want learners to experience success, so they may ask easier questions that have an obvious answer or perform activities that don't stretch the participants. That is actually a disservice to learners: research shows that when people struggle with content and master it, they remember it longer and are more likely to transfer it to the job. Making learning challenging is a best practice and a research-proven technique for helping training work.

Elizabeth and Robert Bjork first identified the impact of challenge in learning. They called the things that slowed down learning and made it more difficult *desirable difficulties*. These may feel less productive at the time, but in the long run, they make learning stronger and enduring.

Some desirable difficulties in learning include:

- **Spacing out practice over time, so that learners must pull from long-term memory rather than short-term memory**
- **Mixing up teaching methods so that the learner doesn't know what will happen next (just like in real life)**
- **Learning related skills or concepts in parallel, a practice known as *interleaving* (as opposed to *blocking,* which introduces one skill or idea at a time)**

There are undesirable difficulties in learning, too. These are when the learner doesn't have the background knowledge or skills to respond to a difficult challenge. That makes a case for laying down some background and providing appropriate resources *before* presenting a difficult problem to learners, or at least understanding learners' backgrounds and what experience they've had with a skill or topic already.

When learners repeatedly use effort to recall information and to practice skills, the knowledge becomes integrated into mental models. These models occur when a set of related ideas or a sequence of motor skills fuse into a meaningful whole that's then adapted and applied in later settings. For instance, when dealing with an angry customer, agents use many skills. They must stay engaged while not responding in kind and identify the right time to respond with logic and the right time to merely empathize. They also have to express meaningful empathy and understand the business rules that govern what they can and cannot do in different circumstances. In addition, they may try to find information in the CRM or knowledge base, all while still engaging with the customer. That's five skills that are generally taught in isolation, one at a time—empathy, being appropriately responsive, de-escalating, business rules, and system navigation. A challenging activity would have agents do all of these things at the same time, just as they would do in real life. And maybe that happens before teaching some of the skills. They would need to know something about system navigation before the challenge, but for the rest, learners can call on past experiences. A debrief afterward to break apart the experience, extract helpful insights, and correct wrong information will help the learning stick.

Trying to come up with an answer or a solution rather than having it presented leads to better learning and longer retention of the correct answer or solution, even when the answer or solution is wrong, just so long as the correct answer or solution is provided. Contrary to conventional wisdom, being wrong does not enforce the wrong answer as long as the learner receives proper feedback. Being wrong and then corrected actually reinforces the right information and makes it easier to remember over time.

4 WAYS TO MAKE AGENT TRAINING CHALLENGING

Provide writing prompts that ask learners to summarize main points

Have agents reflect on what was necessary and/or how they will use the content

Ask agents to brainstorm on how one skill set relates to another

Provide repeated practice over time, using a variety of training methods so that the unexpected happens *(just like it does on the floor)*

Don’t be afraid to challenge your learners. While it may be a temporarily uncomfortable experience, the benefits will be lasting, as agents are better able to remember and apply skills and concepts on the job. After all, isn’t improved knowledge and skills on the job the reason why we train?

Best Practice #8: Use Corrective Feedback

Since making mistakes is the best way to learn, isn't it logical that giving corrective feedback is vital for learning? Even so, some trainers are reluctant to point out when people are wrong or at least not wholly correct. They want the classroom to be a safe place and fear that corrective feedback might cause people to stop contributing.

The classroom should, indeed, be a safe place. Learners should feel safe enough to make mistakes, fail, and, as a result, learn. But this doesn't necessarily mean that the classroom will always be safe from embarrassment, from the consequences of mistakes, or from receiving corrective feedback.

Of course, trainers should avoid giving feedback that shames or embarrasses—that's not the aim of corrective feedback. The objective of corrective feedback is to help students learn the right information. It's critical to correct wrong impressions, interpretations, and memories to reinforce the correct information and resolve the confusion that participants may not realize they have.

In a classroom situation in front of others (where embarrassment is more likely), here are several useful phrases to use to begin corrective feedback:

- **"If there's anything I would suggest it would be..."**
- **"The only thing that would make it even better is..."**
- **"Well, not quite. Consider...."**
- **"What does everyone else think?"** (This encourage the other participants to respond, which is often less threatening than the response from the trainer.)

Corrective feedback supports retrieval practice, which promotes long-term remembering. It also gives you an opportunity to uncover participant confusion about the subtler points of content and the chance to clarify the differences. Participant mistakes are critical to revealing these misconceptions and then correcting them during training.

One final point about feedback: don't worry that pointing out errors will reinforce wrong behavior. When presented with a multiple-choice question where three answers are wrong and one is right, the wrong answers aren't reinforced more than the right answers as long as learners receive corrective feedback when they choose the wrong answer. The learner's effort of reconciling what they thought was correct with what is correct helps them remember the right information more strongly, aiding long-term memory.

In summary, don’t be afraid to give corrective feedback when learners make mistakes. Do so with care and kindness, but be clear about what is correct. I’m always telling myself and others that we learn best from our mistakes. Thank the person who makes a mistake in front of others for the opportunity to clarify information for everyone else. Capitalize on the opportunity to use errors to strengthen learning with corrective feedback.

In what ways are we failing to provide corrective feedback onto agents on a regular basis? Capture your thoughts in the space below.

Best Practice #9: Ensure Variety

> We're programmed to shut our brains off when the same thing keeps happening. When things are the same, our unconscious mind tells us they don't need our attention. When things are different, however, our brains wake up. That's why mixing things up and using variety makes training much more effective.

Anything new in the learning environment will catch participants' attention. Newness is addictive to the human brain. If, however, the same learning activities are used too long or too often, they'll become repetitive and routine. So, mixing things up, doing different things, and always looking for new delivery ideas is critical for mainlining your participants' attention and motivation.

The chunking technique lends itself to varying the learning activity, unless you use the exact same one-minute review activity every 10-20 minutes. That becomes too routine. Every 10-20 minutes, have participants do something different and/or change the delivery. Move from lecture to brainstorming, to a case study, to small group activities, to a video, to a discussion, to a demonstration, to a game, or to any one of many other delivery methods and activities.

The higher the contrast between activities, the more attention it will get from participants. The distinction can be **physical,** where the participants move from place to place in the room. It can also be **visual,** where participants look at photos, watch a video, draw pictures, or diagram a chart. Or the contrast can be **emotional,** if you tell a touching or exciting story or ask participants to share their own stories. To raise the contrast even more, try a mix of all three.

The contrast of emotional variety is often overlooked. You may have heard an instructor say something like, "This is important, so pay attention." Unfortunately, this doesn't grab participants' attention. What would grab attention? Doing something different, such as having participants determine what's most important in a scenario or how to approach a problem in a case study. This is even more effective if you communicate the consequences of failure and impose a tight deadline to create a sense of drama or urgency in the scenario. Help agents see the consequences for their customers by telling customer stories, or help supervisors see the consequences to their direct reports by presenting from the direct reports' viewpoint.

Showing participants how to apply learning through simulations, games, case studies, role plays, videos, stories, and other activities is even more effective than telling people the information is essential. Just be sure to mix up the application activity rather than doing the same thing all the time. Role playing is a helpful activity, but like any other activity, it gets tiring and less effective if it happens too often. Mix things up and use a variety of training delivery methods to keep participants engaged.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

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1. Engage Multiple Senses
2. Chunk Training Content
3. Align Context
4. Guide Attention
5. Use Repetition
6. Practice Retrieval
7. Make it Challenging
8. Give Corrective Feedback
9. Ensure Variety

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