Handout 4-3. How Do You Establish a Positive Learning Environment?

We opened this train-the-trainer session by stating that you need to focus on the learners. It is your job as the trainer to use whatever you have at your disposal to establish a learning environment of trust, respect, safety, integrity, and success.

CREATE A SAFE HAVEN FOR LEARNING

Some learners may arrive excited about the training. Others may think that training is punishment, and others may bring burdens with them. You can create a safe haven. Here are some ideas:
- Be prepared early enough to greet participants at the door, welcome them, learn their names, and allow time for them to tell you something about themselves.
- Share the objectives of the training early, prior to the session if possible.
- Let participants know how they will benefit from the information.
- Demonstrate your respect for each individual.
- Add whimsy to pique curiosity, and add a smile; for example, use crayons, clay, or brightly colored sticky notes.
- Use names and sincere reinforcement to build rapport.

CREATE A COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT

Arrive in a training room early enough to make it yours so that you can welcome the learners as your guests. To create a comfortable environment, consider these ideas:
- Make sure that lighting is bright. It's depressing to walk into a ballroom when the lights are dimmed.
- Learn how to adjust the thermostat to the level that is most comfortable for the majority of the participants. Remember that you will never please everyone all the time. Do your best.
- Ensure that the environment feels comfortable. Hide empty boxes, straighten chairs, and place materials neatly at each seat. When the room is in order, people feel that you took the time and trouble to prepare for them.
- Ensure that you and your visuals can be seen and heard by all learners. Try it out.
- Have coffee ready in the morning, and plan for ample breaks.

ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

Active and ample participation is the most important thing you can encourage to enhance learning. Here are a couple of thoughts to get you started:
- Use small breakout groups to overcome early reluctance to share ideas or concerns.
- Use body language to encourage participation; positive nods, smiles, and eye contact all show that you are interested in others' ideas.
- Share something about yourself to begin a trusted exchange of ideas.
- Learn techniques to get learners to open up.

FACILITATE MORE THAN YOU PRESENT

A straight lecturette is rarely required, perhaps only when rules or laws must be imparted word for word. Facilitating, rather than lecturing, usually enhances learning for everyone. Here are some ideas:
- Create discussion. Not just between you and the learners, but among the learners.
- Get opinions and ideas out in the open before you deliver your message. You may be surprised at how much training the learners can do for you.
- Provide opportunities for participants to evaluate their own learning throughout the session.
- Create experiential learning activities in which the learners discover their own "aha!" moments.

ENCOURAGE PARTICIPANTS TO TRACK THEIR OWN PROGRESS

Tracking progress means celebrating success, overcoming obstacles, and deciding next steps.
   Plan for ways participants can do this:
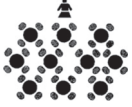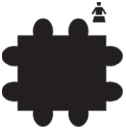- Create individual checkpoints in the program.
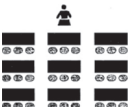
- Build in group review of learning.
- Encourage participants to identify barriers to the learning.
- Pair individuals as sounding boards for one another.
- Plan celebrations: distributing certificates, team applauses, or "moments in the sun."

Room Set-Up Your room setup also establishes a positive learning environment. What are you trying to accomplish in your training session? Are you trying to build teams, build one large team, or interject cooperation?

Listed below are several seating arrangements. Can you think of a specific time when you might use each one during the training sessions that you currently conduct?

ARRANGEMENT	GROUP SIZE	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
U-Shaped	12–22	Encourages large group discussion; builds the larger team; encourages close contact with participants	If a small room, may be difficult to work with those on the other side; linear layout makes eye contact among participants difficult
V-Shaped (V points to front)	Teams of 4–5 and groups of 16–25	Easy to work in table teams; no one's back is entirely facing back of room; best alternative using rectangular tables	Some difficulty to promote teamwork among the entire group
Clusters	16–50	Promotes teamwork in each cluster; everyone faces the front if chairs are on one side only	Difficult to get participation from those who face the back; some participants may need to move chairs to face the front
Single Round/Square	8–12	Facilitates problem solving; smaller size promotes total involvement; easy for trainer to step out of the action	Media and visual use is difficult; limited group size
Conference	8–12	Moderate communication among group	Maintains trainer as lead; sense of formality; inability for trainer to get close to participants
Classroom	Any size	Traditional, may be expected by learners; trainer controls; participants can view visuals	Low involvement; one-way communication; difficult to form small groups