THE FRAMEWORK

6

While the foundation of Cafeteria Learning is the activities, a successful workshop also provides a solid framework to provide a complete learning experience. Like a great story, the workshop should contain three main parts: a beginning (appetizer), middle (the main course), and end (dessert). With Cafeteria Learning, the beginning is a priming activity that hooks learners’ attention immediately, the middle is where learners explore content through the variety of self-directed activities, and the end is an opportunity to debrief the content, synthesize meaning, and prepare learners to apply the content on the job.

Priming

A Cafeteria Learning workshop kicks off with priming, which serves to whet learners’ appetites and gets them thinking about important topics before the workshop officially begins. In chapter 2, the benefits of priming were discussed, including increasing learners’ abilities to retrieve information in the future and activating an important problem-solving area of the brain.

During the priming phase, learners begin by exploring terms and concepts at a high level. This helps them begin thinking about the content and referring to their own experiences and existing knowledge to help them build connections before the workshop officially begins. Priming helps the memory retrieve information when stimulated, causing a chain reaction in which one part of a concept is linked to another (Bodie, Powers, and Fitch-Hauser 2006, 125). It can affect decision making by preparing someone for a particular word, phrase, or idea. It’s often used in advertising but can be used in learning when introducing new concepts.

Example of Priming Activity

For the priming activity in the brain-based learning workshop, learners select one quote card from the poster as they enter the room. Each quote card has a fact or a thought-provoking quote about brain-based learning attached to it. For example, “All knowledge is connected to all other knowledge. The fun is in making the connections”—paleopathologist Arthur Aufderheide. Or “I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it”—artist Pablo Picasso.

We then provided discussion questions for learners to answer based on the quote card they selected. For example, “What first came to mind when you read the quote card?” As learners await the official start of the workshop, their brains are already getting ready to learn.

Foundational Content

Before launching into the main activities of your workshop, consider what knowledge or context you need to provide in order to ensure that your learners have a common baseline from which to partake in the main activities.

Foundational content should be brief (we recommend no more than 10 minutes) and commonly consists of definitions, related company policies, or a brief overview of the topic at hand. This portion of the workshop creates a nice transition from the priming activity. While the intention of priming is to get learners to think about the topic, the foundational content ensures that all the learners begin with the same knowledge. ’The lecture technique is employed, but only briefly so that learners have the opportunity to synthesize the information before their attention span begins to wane. Of John Medina’s Brain Rules(2008), the fourth rule reminds us, “We don’t pay attention to boring things.” So make sure this portion of the workshop is no more than 10 minutes. Medina writes (74), “What happens at the 10-minute mark to cause such trouble? Nobody knows. The brain seems to be making choices according to some stubborn timing pattern, undoubtedly influenced by both culture and gene. This fact suggests a teaching and business imperative: Find a way to arouse and then hold somebody’s attention for a specific period of time.”

Example of Foundational Content

A brief introduction to Medina’s brain rules sets the stage for the learning to come. Two of the brain rules are discussed—the first rule states that exercise boosts brain power and the fifth that repetition is key to remembering—along with research data and examples.

Debriefing

As is true with any learning effort, debriefing is a critical component of Cafeteria Learning. Learners have had a substantial chunk of time to engage in the activities of their choosing. Debriefing done well blends the immediate learning experience with real-work situations once learners leave the workshop space. For learners to apply what they learned, they must:

See the value in applying it.

Know how to apply it.

Be given the opportunity to apply it (Wick and others 2006).

In Cafeteria Learning, you have three opportunities to debrief learning. The first is to have reflection questions for learners at each activity station. These questions relate directly to the specific activity or topic and can be answered individually, in pairs, or in a small group, depending on the structure of the activity.

The second way is to debrief as a large group. When it’s time to wrap up the activities, the facilitator brings all learners back together and summarizes the learning at each of the three main topics. This is meant to be a high-level communication to validate that learners experienced similar outcomes and reached the learning objectives.

Debriefing usually involves asking questions that help learners organize, assimilate, and share what they’ve discovered throughout the workshop. A third way to debrief learning is to ask specific questions of each learner on what they learned. The facilitator either distributes notecards to all learners with prepared questions and instructs them to take a few minutes to reflect and write down their responses or distributes blank notecards and asks questions aloud to the group. The facilitator then collects the completed notecards, and, one a time, reads them aloud and emphasizes the learning outcome.

Debriefing requires solid facilitation skills. The role of the facilitator is to guide the debriefing discussion. The goal here is to ensure that:

There is effective participation.

Learners achieve a mutual understanding.

All contributions are considered and included in the ideas, solutions, or decisions that emerge.

Learners take shared responsibility for the outcome.

We also like to get learners to think as much as possible about ways in which they can apply the workshop’s content to their individual workplaces or everyday lives. Asking learners to come up with a personal goal or takeaway related to the theme of the workshop is one way of doing this.

After learners have put their time and energy into the activities, the debriefing activity serves to tie it back to the learning objectives and enable learners to make connections between significant individual “ah-ha” moments. For a skilled facilitator, the process of debriefing each learning topic should come quite naturally; though, it is always a good investment of time for a facilitator to prepare thoroughly before any workshop, including preparing for the debriefing.

Here are some best practices for debriefing Cafeteria Learning:

Debrief by topic. State the learning objective for each topic and describe the related activities.

Identify where learners have contributed time and energy to activities. Many times these are some of the larger wall-based/scribing activities. This can help inform your timing estimates and highlight which activities were popular.

Ask learners to share some of their input with these activities personally.

If you get little feedback, read some of the activity responses from the wall charts to guide discussion.

Act on opportunities to tie the learners experience back to the objectives for each topic.

Connect learners’ comments to each other.

Revisit the objectives and remind learners of each activity in the topic. Ask them if they feel they achieved the objective through their learning.

Example of a Debriefing Activity

For the debriefing activity, you might pick one of the most popular activities from each topic and facilitate a group discussion around each one. Example questions include, “What was most surprising to you about that activity?” and “Did anyone else who participated in a different activity in this topic find something similar?” or “How did this activity help you think differently about the potential uses of brain-based learning?”

You don’t always have to carefully plan the detail of the debriefing activity ahead of time—to a large extent, the particulars of a debriefing activity will be dictated by the experience of the group. An experienced facilitator will be able to follow the group’s lead while simultaneously ensuring that she touches upon the main topics of the workshop, using her judgment to select debriefing activities and questions relevant to the particular group.

Chapter Summary

If you are trying to create an effective environment for learning, and provide a variety of activities (choices), but don’t provide structure or a framework around activities, learners may feel lost, unable to focus. Without effective boundaries, learners will not be able to do what you need and want them to do because their brains can’t work that way. The framework presented here for a Cafeteria Learning workshop allows learners to focus on a specific concept tied to the learning objective, removes distractions and excess information, and continuously stimulates learners with the necessary knowledge, just when they need it. By instilling a framework, through priming, foundational content, and debriefing, you are creating the right conditions to help learners be at their best, and when they’re at their best, they thrive and positive results stream in.