Dealing with challenging learner behaviour

One of the greatest skills a trainer can develop is an ability to deal with the challenging behaviour of the participants in the training. Every learner will have different needs and will therefore behave differently, depending on their own background, experiences and expectations. Some learners will be positive and cooperative, others might be negative or aggressive. Some will have a great deal to say, some too much and others very little. The challenge for the trainer is to be able to support all these different needs whilst still ensuring that the training is a positive experience for the group as a whole.

AIM OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Module is to enable you to be able to deal effectively with challenging behaviour in training sessions.

By the end of this Module you will have achieved the following objectives:

1. be able to recognise common types of challenging behaviour you may encounter in a training session
2. be able to understand the impact these types of behaviour can have if they are not dealt with
3. be able to confidently deal with common types of challenging behaviour, to ensure the training is successful

There are many different types of challenging behaviour that a trainer might encounter during a training session. It is better to refer to ‘challenging behaviour’ rather than ‘difficult people’. It is more constructive for a trainer to focus on the behaviour and how to deal with this rather than focusing your attention on the person themselves by labelling them as ‘difficult’.
As a trainer you are responsible for policing the atmosphere in the training session and making sure that everyone has a positive experience. **It is your responsibility to deal with behaviour that is not acceptable** and to do what you can to adjust the training to the needs of the learners.

Nobody can ever predict with certainty exactly what sort of behaviour they will face during a training session but **there are two key steps you can take to help yourself be prepared for challenging behaviour if you encounter it:**

1. **Prepare for challenging issues:** Before the training, find out if there are any challenges you may be facing, such as learners who are likely to be nervous, negative or aggressive. What do you know about their circumstances and the difficulties they may bring into the training? Use the ground rules at the start of the training as a way of setting the tone for how you would like learners to behave.

2. **Know how to deal with common types of challenging behaviour:** Every human being is different and no two people will behave in the same way, but there are some common types of challenging behaviour which you can plan how to deal with. These are discussed below.

**The Expert**

Some learners already have a lot of knowledge (or think they do!) and are very keen to share this with the rest of the group. They might spend a long time talking and will tend to be very confident, even though this confidence might sometimes be misplaced.

A person in your group might be The Expert if:

- they have a lot of knowledge about the subject (or think they do)
- talk a lot and share their knowledge as often as they can
- they want the trainer and other learners to recognise their expertise
- often share their knowledge, even when not asked to do so

What can be the impact of The Expert’s behaviour?

- If they spend too much time talking, they might take over the group and put other learners off so they might not come forward with their own ideas
- They might annoy or even anger the other learners. If you do not deal with the behaviour, the other learners may feel let down by you
Training and Facilitation Skills

They might challenge your authority as trainer, even undermining you

If they do not know as much as they claim, they might mislead the group

If they do not know as much as they claim, they might put you in a position where you have no choice but to challenge them

How can you deal with The Expert’s behaviour?

Do not simply ignore them as the behaviour will simply continue

Acknowledge what they are saying, thank them for their contribution and show that you appreciate their ideas. If what they are saying is correct and useful then they should be given credit for this

Rather than competing against them, consider whether there are any areas where they could take a lead by sharing their experience and helping others

If their ideas are worthwhile, refer back to them later in discussion so that they feel acknowledged and they can be an ally rather than a rival, for example “which was something you pointed out earlier X…”

If they are starting to take over, try to be more active in involving other learners – put questions directly to other people in the group and even be prepared to say “that’s excellent, but let’s hear from someone else”

If they are challenging your authority, be ready with your own facts

If they get their facts wrong, correct this so that the other learners do not have the wrong information. Be careful to do this in a way that is clear and factual, rather than telling them off

If they are being very disruptive and this does not stop, talk to them when there is a break and point out that you appreciate their contributions but it’s important that you can also hear from other people

Some learners may be quite aggressive in the way they behave towards others, being very quick to criticise things they do not agree with and to question other people’s views and ideas. They may seem very dominant.

The Aggressor

I am very critical of others and sometimes confrontational

A person in your group might be The Aggressor if:

they have little patience with others in the group – both learners and the trainer
Training and Facilitation Skills

- they are often questioning and sometimes argumentative with others
- they often challenge what the trainer has to say and their authority
- they like to dominate and are unwilling to see others' points of view

**What can be the impact of The Aggressor's behaviour?**

- They can give the training a very negative tone
- They can make people in the group feel uncomfortable and make them less willing to cooperate. If the trainer does not deal with the behaviour, the group may feel intimidated and let down
- They can cause training to become side-tracked with arguments
- They can shut down discussion
- They can challenge the authority of the trainer and even threaten the trainer’s self-confidence

**How can you deal with The Aggressor’s behaviour?**

- Be assertive and confident – you are the authority figure in the training and you are entitled to expect to be allowed to run your training session
- Acknowledge what they are saying but focus on the words and the subject matter rather than being distracted by the emotion
- Ask them why they feel the way they do and ask them to suggest their alternative ideas
- Remind them of the ground rules of the training session, such as treating everyone with respect and allowing everyone to speak
- Try to reduce their impact by moving the discussion on to other matters and inviting other people in the room to take part
- If the behaviour continues, tell them directly which part of their behaviour you do not find acceptable and what you would like to change (for example “I’m happy to talk about your point but we can do this without having an argument – there is no need to raise your voice”)
- Consider taking a break to allow things to calm down, working in groups to take the focus away from The Aggressor or, if their behaviour is really bad, asking them to leave.
Training and Facilitation Skills

A person in your group might be The Complainer if:

- they sometimes show a lack of enthusiasm for the training and the role
- they will usually take a negative approach, focusing on problems and the things that could go wrong
- they can be sceptical about some of the things they are being told
- they sometimes complain about the training and the monitoring role

What can be the impact of The Complainer’s behaviour?

- They can create a very negative tone and drag other people down
- They can put barriers in the way of learning, by convincing themselves and others that things cannot be changed or improved
- They can be challenging for others to work with because they may take a lot of persuading and be unwilling to take part
- Their complaining can create dissatisfaction with the training
- They can be demoralising for the trainer to deal with

How can you deal with The Complainer’s behaviour?

- Try to understand what lies at the root of the negativity – is there something they are concerned about that you can help with?
- Focus on the positives and the future – show what can be done.
- Give them encouragement and point out what is going well.
- Try to turn negative language into positive language – for example saying “this is an opportunity” rather than “this is a problem”
- Focus on facts and evidence, rather than allowing discussions to become distracted by hypothetical problems

Some learners may approach training in a very negative way, focusing on problems and the things that could go wrong. They may also spend time complaining about aspects of their role and the training they are involved in.
Training and Facilitation Skills

- Seek support from people in the group who are positive and try to reach a positive consensus with the other learners
- Show them how the learning is relevant to them
- Consider grouping them with learners who have a more positive approach

The Quiet Learner

Some learners find it hard to participate actively in group training sessions, preferring not to say too much. They may come across as quiet or even nervous. They may avoid answering questions altogether and prefer to let others take the lead in group discussions and activities.

A person in your group might be The Quiet Learner if:

- they are very quiet during training, only contributing when they are asked to
- are sometimes nervous about giving answers or ideas and do not like being put on the spot
- often defer to other people’s views
- despite not sharing ideas easily, may actually think about things carefully

What can be the impact of The Quiet Learner’s behaviour?

- If they do not fully participate then they may not receive the full benefit of the training. Their needs may be overlooked
- The trainer may not be able to assess how well they are progressing with the training
- People in the group who have more to say may end up dominating the training
- The views and ideas of the Quiet Learner may be overlooked
- Other learners may find themselves putting in more work and effort, in order to compensate for the Quiet Learner
- The trainer may have to work much harder to keep discussions going

How can you deal with The Quiet Learner’s behaviour?
Encourage all learners to say something at the start of the training, so that everyone can get used to using their voices and listening to each other.

Try to draw them into discussion in a way that does not intimidate them, for example by asking them simpler questions or about areas where you know they are more confident.

Ask questions that are targeted and which will help the Quiet Learner to answer. For example, instead of asking “do you have any feedback on that exercise?” consider “what steps did you take to overcome to problem of the lack of resources?” or even making an observation and then posing a question, such as “I saw that you had some real success overcoming the problem of the lack of resources – how did you achieve that?”

Use smaller groups as a way of getting them to talk to others and share ideas, which they may find less intimidating.

Pair them up with another learner so that they can work together and feedback ideas together.

Give them encouragement and positive feedback to help them to come forward.

Manage the behaviour of the more confident people in the group so that it does not dominate and prevent the Quiet Learner from coming forward with ideas.

Some learners find it difficult to concentrate and can become easily distracted during a training session. They might not be able to hold their focus for a long period of time and may be wanting to constantly move on from one activity to the next.

A person in your group might be The Distracted if:

- they are easily distracted by things unrelated to the training, such as external factors or their phone.
- they only concentrate for a few minutes when they are not enjoying something.
- they bore easily and like to move around.
- they sometimes focus on and discuss things that are not relevant.
What can be the impact of The Distracted’s behaviour?

- They may stop taking in information from the training and not gain the full benefit of the session
- They can cause others to become distracted
- They can cause a discussion to head off in a direction that is not relevant and which wastes time
- They can involve the trainer in extra work, for example having to repeat instructions or having to correct mistakes
- They can annoy other people in the group

How can you deal with The Distracted’s behaviour?

- Make sure that every training session has a range of activities that will suit different learning styles, so there is not too much of any one thing.
- Provide opportunities to move around
- If you notice that a learner is becoming distracted, try to re-focus their attention by asking them a question or giving them something to do
- Make use of discussion groups and so that The Distracted is able to participate more actively without having to simply listen
- Do what you can to remove distractions that could be a problem – for example by only handing out the materials to be used for the current session
- Ask them to work with somebody who is able to focus for longer
- Quickly re-direct conversations into areas which are relevant and away from irrelevant matters
- Make it clear to them that you have noticed they are distracted, for example by making eye contact with them or repeating a question
SUMMARY: Challenging behaviour

It’s your job to create the right atmosphere and challenge behaviour that is not right.

1. Find out about the needs of your learners before the training and set ground rules when the training starts.
2. Know how to recognise and deal with some common types of challenging behaviour:

**The Expert**
- I know a lot and like to tell people what I know as often as possible
- Thank them for their contribution and give credit
- Can they take the lead in a discussion?
- If they are taking over, be more active in involving other learners, targeting questions to them instead
- Be confident, know your facts and be prepared to correct The Expert if they are wrong!
- Tell them if they are being disruptive

**The Aggressor**
- I am very critical of others and sometimes confrontational
- Be assertive and confident!
- Acknowledge what they are saying but focus on the words rather than the emotion
- Ask them why they feel that way and ask for ideas
- Remind them of the ground rules and respect
- Reduce their impact by turning attention to others
- If the behaviour continues, warn them

**The Complainer**
- I have a very negative attitude and focus on problems
- Try to understand what is causing the negativity
- Focus on the positives and the future
- Give encouragement and try to turn negative language into positive language
- Seek support from positive people in the group
- Show them how the learning applies to them
- Group them with learners with a positive approach

**The Quiet Learner**
- I don’t say very much and don’t like my voice to be heard
- Encourage everyone to speak at the start of the training session and keep involving everyone
- Draw them into discussion by asking easy questions and ask questions that are targeted
- Allow them to discuss in smaller groups
- Pair them up with another person to share tasks
- Give them encouragement and positive feedback
- Keep the more confident people under control

**The Distracted**
- I am easily distracted and find it hard to focus
- Use a variety of activities to appeal to all learning styles and provide opportunities to move around
- Re-focus their attention by asking questions
- Use discussion groups to help them to participate
- Remove distractions that could be a problem
- Ask them to work with someone who can focus
- Re-direct irrelevant conversations into relevant discussion
SUMMARY: Challenging behaviour

Your notes