

Starting the Training Event

Aims:

To establish the key issues which should be addressed at the start of a training event

To generate ways of identifying and responding to participants' personal agendas for training

Resources required:

Training room and small group discussion areas; flipchart, pens and OHP

3.1 'What to cover at the start of a training event' OHP transparency

3.2 'Responding to participants' agendas' handouts

4.1 'Starting a Training Event' exercise: participants instruction sheet

'Learning log' sheets

1 Background notes



How a training event starts is crucial.

A good start can create a positive partnership between trainer and participants which can be developed throughout the event. A good start gains the attention of participants, stimulates their participation, clarifies expectations and allays fears. Finally, it can energise the participants and begins to establish the trainer's credibility.

A bad start can make it difficult to create the all-important relationship between trainer and participants. It can confuse participants, demotivate them or even encourage resistance.

For these reasons, the trainer should think carefully about planning the start of any training event. This chapter concentrates on the practical aspects of starting a training event. There are a number of key points which must be covered at or near the start of a training event. These are summarised in 3.1 and are expanded in more detail below:

- Welcome and personal introduction by trainer

Participants have made a decision to attend the training event rather than do something else! Although it may seem self-evident, it is important to acknowledge this right at the start of the event. It is also important for the trainer to introduce herself early in the course. Offering a little information at this stage signals the trainer's willingness to open with others and may make her more 'human' in the eyes of participants.

- Explaining how the training event came about

It is dangerous to assume that all the participants

know how the course came about. A brief summary can help the participants to put the event into context. This is particularly important if a trainer has been asked to run a course by someone who is not present at the event itself. However, if the person with whom the event was planned is present, it is a good idea to ask them to add their comments. This helps to establish the idea that the course is a partnership between the trainer and the group.

- Identifying and negotiating agendas

This is a crucial part of starting any training event. It indicates the trainer's willingness to negotiate goals and methods with the participants. Equally, explaining to participants when she does not have the authority to negotiate goals can help to clarify restraints and establish the trainer's integrity.

- Describing the role of the trainer

This can be summarised as creating a climate which encourages learning and mutual support. It is also important for the trainer to explain her 'process' role: timekeeping, introducing structured exercises, identifying learning points and providing inputs. Finally, the trainer has an important role to play by ensuring that participants keep to mutually agreed 'safeguards'.

- Dealing with anxieties/Establishing safeguards

All participants (including the trainer!) are likely to have some anxieties at the start of a training event. It is important for everyone to have the opportunity to acknowledge these and for the trainer to create ways of dealing with them right at the start. This legitimises the feelings that most people bring with them to new or challenging situations. It also signals the type of climate she is trying to create. 'Safeguards' are mutually acceptable guidelines for the conduct of a training event. They cover such issues as non-participation in exercises; confidentiality and allowing other participants to express their opinions without resorting to personal criticism. Safeguards can be suggested by the trainer, but are best identified by the participants. Either way, they should be agreed by all. They are covered in more detail later in these notes.

- Dealing with practical matters

All participants should be made aware of emergency exits and alarms; location of toilets; how urgent messages will be dealt with (including messages about children in the creche if there is one); availability of telephones at break times; breaks, finishing time, meals and refreshments and any other important practical information relevant to the particular event. Much of this can be distributed in the form of a handout.

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- Introducing goals and programme

If participants are well enough prepared, they should already know the purpose of the training event! This may or may not be adapted as a result of discussing their own personal agendas. It is useful to remind participants of the intended outcomes of the event and the programme which has been devised to achieve this. If possible, a flipchart sized programme should be pinned up as a reminder for trainer and participants. Each participant should have their own copy of the programme if this has been devised in advance of the event.

- Starting to build a relationship with participants

This is not so much an item to be covered as a reminder that everything the trainer does will either help to build a partnership with the participants or resistance from them. Trainers should always keep this in mind when they open a training event. Building relationships is the subject of Chapter 11.

- Helping participants get to know one-another

Don't assume that people who work in the same organisation will know each other. Use opening 'ice-breaker' exercises as suggested in Chapter 11. If possible, send out in advance a participant list to everyone attending your training event.

- Answering participants' questions

It is almost certain that participants will have their own questions about the training event. Some may be covered under the headings we have outlined. Others may not. It is important to allow participants an opportunity to ask questions. Trainers should make a point of 'giving permission' to ask questions which may seem 'silly' or 'obvious'. One way of making this easier for participants is to pair them up and ask them to come up with the questions 'as a pair'.

Each of these points is important, but, in our experience, two are often overlooked or avoided by trainers. The bulk of this chapter concentrates on 'Identifying and negotiating agendas' and 'Dealing with anxieties/ Establishing safeguards'.

Identifying and negotiating agendas

Training programmes should reflect the needs and priorities of participants. This may seem obvious and yet comments such as "It wasn't very relevant to me", "It wasn't what I was expecting", or "It was a complete waste of time" can often be heard from dissatisfied participants when they return from training events.

It is impossible to satisfy everyone on a training event but there are ways of ensuring that all participants get

something out of attending. Participants should not only know what to expect but also have some say in devising the programme on offer. This requires the trainer to make herself aware of participants' expectations: what they hope to learn, the methods they expect to use, and the extent to which they are prepared to participate. These and other expectations are what we mean by *the participants' agendas*.

There are three stages at which the trainer can develop a clearer idea of the participants' agendas. The advantages and disadvantages of each stage are summarised in handout 3.2.

1. Before the detailed planning of an event at a briefing meeting with the person who is organising the training. The value of this depends on the awareness of the training organiser: how well-tuned that person is to the needs and expectations of the participants. This approach has the advantage of allowing participants to influence or, at least, choose to attend, the training programme on offer at an early stage. In other words, if they don't like what's on the menu, they can choose to eat elsewhere!
2. Prior to the event. This can be done by talking to the participants or by asking them to complete and return preparatory work well in advance of the training event. Detailed application forms with questions like 'What do you hope to get out of attending this training event?' or exercises which enable participants to focus on their expectations of the event (such as tick lists or questionnaires) can all provide the trainer with helpful information. This knowledge can help the trainer with the detailed planning of both the content and process of the event.
3. At the beginning of the event itself by asking the participants. For the trainer, this is the highest risk point at which to identify the participants' agendas. It allows the trainer little or no time to undertake further preparation. In effect, it means incorporating changes to the programme or 'thinking on your feet' for ways to acknowledge the issues which participants have identified.

Trainers should clarify with participants which parts of the programme are non-negotiable. To do this honestly, the trainer should be clear about the degree to which she is prepared (or able) to negotiate or consult with participants over the programme content. The degree of negotiability of a programme may be outside the trainer's control. Plans may have been made with a manager or training organiser who will not be a participant at the event. In these circumstances it is particularly important for the trainer to know how much freedom she has to negotiate changes in the programme with the participants.

It is much better to be honest about the non-

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negotiability of a programme than to raise unachievable expectations about participants' influence over the content of the training event.

Trainers should be aware that they don't *have* to incorporate every issue raised by participants. It is quite legitimate to explain that a certain issue cannot be covered (for example, because it would require too much preparation time). Remember, also, that even if the trainer does not feel comfortable or competent *herself* to deal with a particular issue, one of the participants, with her support, may be able to do so. It may even be enough to negotiate a space on the programme for the issue to be addressed by the participants as a group.

Dealing with anxieties/Establishing safeguards

Equally important at the start of a training event is helping participants to acknowledge any concerns they may have about the process or practical arrangements. If these concerns are not acknowledged and dealt with at the beginning of the event, they may well prevent people from participating fully. They may even lead to participants sabotaging their own or other people's learning.

A number of techniques for identifying concerns are open to the trainer. The simplest method is, simply, to ask the participants! If this is done in a structured, non-threatening way, it can allow the expression of most fears and concerns which participants may be bringing with them. An example of a non-threatening method we often use is the 'Hopes and Fears' exercise.

The 'Hopes and Fears' exercise is a simple way of identifying participants' agendas and the concerns they have about the training event. Participants are asked to work together in pairs to list their hopes for the event: what they hope to learn; how they hope the event will be organised and any other hopes they have. They are also asked to identify their fears: what concerns they have about the event. The trainer lists each pair's fears and comments on the issues raised. Participants are asked if the particular fear is shared and what practical action can be taken to prevent the fear arising.

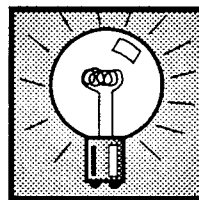
These suggestions, and any other the trainer may add, can be used to create a series of safeguards for the conduct of the event. What we mean by 'safeguards' are guidelines which every person at the event agrees to follow. For example, a participant may list as one of his fears "Being criticised by other people". The trainer may ask for clarification about this, pointing out that there is a difference between feedback on performance and personal criticism.

Having helped the participants to identify their concerns, the trainer then has the responsibility of dealing with them. Here, she should enlist the other participants' help. She can ask them to come up with practical suggestions for ensuring other participants' fears are not realised.

These are listed on flipchart paper and agreed with the course participants. It is important that all participants give some indication that they agree with the safeguards so a 'round' can be helpful here. In this way, if problems arise later, the trainer can, if necessary, enlist the help of other participants when she points out that an agreed safeguard has been broken. This helps to locate the responsibility for the conduct of the group with the participants themselves.

Another exercise which can help to establish safeguards involves asking participants "What kind of group do you want this to be?" and "What kind of group do you *not* want this to be?". Participants are encouraged to respond to these questions in pairs (itself a fairly unthreatening start) by stating "We want this to be the kind of group where..." and "We want to avoid ... in this group". The trainer writes all the responses on flipchart sheets and encourages each pair to explain what they mean, using illustrative examples. The trainer should make a point of noting contradictory statements and securing agreement on those which everyone accepts. Again, a round can be helpful here.

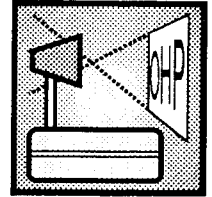
2 Suggestions for using these materials



- 1 Outline the aims of the session and introduce your session plan.
- 2 Introduce exercise 4.1 and distribute 'Starting a Training Event' participants' instruction sheets.
- 3 Lead a discussion on the strategies participants suggested for how to start training events. Use the background notes and OHP 3.1 to summarise the main points. Add any of the participants' suggestions to the OHP transparency.
- 4 Introduce the idea of the participants agenda. Lead a discussion on when the trainer should best respond to these and distribute handout 3.2, 'Responding to participants' agendas'. Ask for further examples of advantages and disadvantages and note these on a flipchart sheet.
- 5 Distribute 'Learning log' sheets for completion by participants.
- 6 Close the session with a review of its aims and learning points.

3.1 OHP Transparency

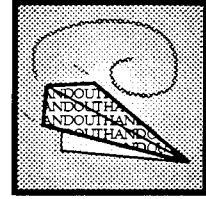
What to cover at the start of a training event



- Welcome and personal introduction by trainer
- Explaining how the event came about
- Identifying and negotiating agendas
- Dealing with anxieties/Establishing safeguards
- Agreeing groundrules
- Describing the role of the trainer
- Dealing with practical matters
- Introducing goals and programme
- Starting to build a relationship with participants
- Helping participants get to know one-another
- Answering participants' questions

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3.2 Handout

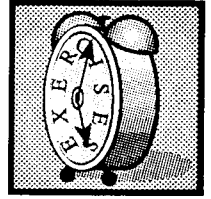
Responding to participants' agendas

Stage	Advantages	Disadvantages
Before the detailed planning of the event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participants can influence the training programme on offer and make it relevant to their needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • only feasible if the training event is aimed at specific participants
Prior to the event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gets the views of those who have already made a commitment to attend • allows the trainer time to analyse and respond to specific needs • the training starts before the event! • participants motivation to attend may be higher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may be unpopular with participants if the amount of preparation required of them is time-consuming • not all participants are likely to return the preparation work so the event may reflect some participants needs more than others
At the beginning of the event itself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensures that the views of all participants are considered • process of negotiation becomes an important signal of the trainer's style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high risk strategy for the trainer who has to respond in some way to participants' agendas 'on the spot'

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4.1 Exercise: trainer's notes

'Starting a Training Event'

**Purpose:**

This exercise encourages participants to identify their own thoughts and feelings prior to attending a training course. After acknowledging and sharing these, they work together to categorise their thoughts and feelings. They are then asked to plan the start of the training event in such a way as to cover the information needs, address the anxieties and deal with any of the other concerns participants might have.

Process:

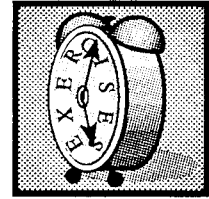
- 1 Explain the purpose of the exercise and divide participants into pairs or threes.
- 2 Distribute the participants' instruction sheets.
- 3 Ask participants to talk about their own thoughts and feelings as they have arrived at a venue to take part in a training course. When each person has had an opportunity to talk about their personal thoughts and feelings, ask each group to note these in a joint list. The pairs/threes should then categorise the statements on lists under the headings 'Need for information'; 'Need for reassurance' and 'Other needs'.
- 4 Bring the small groups together and ask them to give examples under the different headings. Write these on separate flipchart sheets.
- 5 Divide the group into two (or three if there are items on the 'Other needs' sheet).
- 6 Give each group one of the sheets and ask them to come up with ideas for how the trainer could respond to these needs at the start of the training event.
- 7 Bring the groups together and ask each to give a brief summary of their suggestions.
- 8 Use the material in the background notes to summarise and compare responses.

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4.1 Exercise: participants instruction sheet

'Starting a Training Event'



Purpose:

To identify and acknowledge the different needs of participants at the start of a training event.

To create practical strategies for meeting participants needs at the start of a training event.

Process:

- 1 Imagine that you are about to arrive at a venue to be a participant in a training course. (You may wish to think about specific courses you have attended in the past or maybe this one you are on at the moment!) Try to remember the kind of thoughts, questions, and feelings which were going round your mind.
- 2 When each of you has had an opportunity to talk about your personal thoughts and feelings, note them in a joint list.
- 3 Now categorise the statements on your list under the headings
 - Need for information
 - Need for re-assurance
 - Other needs
- 4 When you re-join the large group you will be comparing lists with the other participants.

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