



The Learning Center—Dealing with Disruptive Behavior in Training Classes

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The Learning Center focuses on training topics that have applicability to the needs and interests of the ABSA membership. Be it online learning or improving classroom teaching skills, I will keep readers up-to-date on continuing education resources and opportunities in the burgeoning and rapidly progressing field of biological safety. I welcome feedback or suggestions for future topics. Please send them to me at maryann@eagleson.org or to the Editor, Ira F. Salkin, at irasalkin@aol.com.

Dealing with Disruptive Behavior in Training Classes

Most participants in training classes are cooperative and supportive of the instructor, but all instructors eventually encounter a difficult situation caused by disruptive behavior. Disruptive behavior is any type of behavior that prevents others from learning. These behaviors can range from a person dominating the class with comments and questions, to a person creating a negative energy by being very quiet and uninvolved. In all cases it is important to determine the cause of the behavior and to take corrective action, as one disruptive participant can have an adverse effect on the entire group.

In 13 years of offering classes at the Eagleson Institute, we have found that the vast majority of class participants are attentive and eager to learn. However, we have also encountered a few difficult situations. A book that has been particularly helpful to us is *Dealing with Difficult Participants* by Bob Pike and Dave Arch (1997). This book contains many practical ideas for handling several types of behavior, a few of which are

discussed below.

Pike and Arch describe different types of dominating behaviors, all of which are disruptive. Constantly interrupting the class to tell personal stories or ask meaningless questions, acting like a know-it-all, and socializing with neighbors are examples. The cause could be boredom, a need to be heard, or a belief by a participant that he or she knows everything that is being taught.

What can a trainer do in these circumstances? It's hard to handle these situations if preventative measures haven't been taken, but there are a few options. The instructor's body language is often important for controlling the behavior. For example, one easy and effective technique that often counters dominating behaviors is for the trainer to walk slowly toward the speaker, thus encouraging comments and conversations to be cut short. In addition, it may be beneficial to look at the person, find a pause in the disruptive conversation, interrupt by saying something similar to "thank you for your comments but we don't have time to explore this idea right now," and then quickly break eye contact. If necessary, the trainer can separate this person from the class by standing in between the person and the class, a tactic similar to placing someone in the corner!

Preventative measures, however, are always the best as they are often more positive than punitive ones. If difficult situations are expected, begin the class by setting ground rules that include how questions and comments should be handled. It also helps if the design of the class includes small group activities and perhaps involves a rotation of leadership. Small groups are powerful, as participants' behavior is more noticeable and is often controlled by the group.

At the Eagleson Institute we use a seating arrangement that places people in small groups around a table. Upon taking their seat people feel noticed, which makes a statement at the very beginning of the class that everyone has a role to play and that everyone's contribution is important. We often make use of this seating arrangement to do short group activities that involve practical applications of the material being taught. This type of learning activity has many positive outcomes, including demonstrating the relevance of the content being taught, giving participants an opportunity to share their knowledge, and energizing people by requiring them to be involved in their learning.

What about the quiet participants? They too can be difficult to handle. Their passivity or lack of interest can set a negative tone in the classroom, requiring the use of strategies that generate positive energy. Once again, small groups are very helpful, as each person's

contribution is needed and it's hard for someone to hide. Reasons for quiet behavior include being tired, bored, or shy, or lacking in confidence. Sometimes the trainer can encourage a quiet person by enlisting his or her help, or by giving him or her an assignment to do within a small group. It is important, however, not to increase a quiet person's level of discomfort.

In summary, prevention is easiest and most effective. If you are designing a training program, think about group dynamics. If you do experience a problem, perhaps one of the ideas presented above will help you determine how to handle it.

Reference

Pike, B., & Arch, D. (1997). *Dealing with Difficult Participants*. Minneapolis: Creative Training Techniques Press. (www.cttbobpike.com).