

PLANNING FOR EFFECTIVE IN-HOUSE TRAINING SESSIONS

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With all of the latest requirements for applicator training that are now in place in Michigan, we will be doing much more formal training than we have done in the past. We have known all along, of course, that effective training is the back bone of an effective work force. Now we are being told that we will do this training whether we want to or not. We are very effective applicators and managers, but so often we don't even know where to begin when it comes to teaching. If you can remember the five "P's" of Training, you have the outline for a well received program.

First and foremost, think about the PEOPLE you will be talking to. You have to remember at all times the people who will be your audience and what their needs are. You will be working with adults who, by and large, do not like to be taught. "Just show me what to do and let me do it": is their usual attitude. Classroom situations are not their strong suit. You will get resistance from this group to any attempt to make them think or read or discuss or ask questions in a group setting. (It will not be unusual to have some people who are barely literate at all). A lot of the time you will sense an attitude that, "Hey, I know all this stuff." Most of the time they will not volunteer questions and will remain silent rather than admit they do not understand what you are talking about. This group will not have a long attention span and will "tune-out" after relatively short periods.

Therefore, you must package your information in short segments that will hold them. Keep theoretical/scientific information to a minimum and accent the practical, "hands-on" type of information to the extent possible. Your goal is to prepare competent technicians, not turfgrass PhD's, so focus on what they need to know to do their job. Finally, do an analysis of who your audience will be and what their individual levels and needs are. You will lose half of your audience if you have a mix of experienced and rookie technicians together for a basic topic and will lose the other half if you talk about advanced disease ID. As much as possible, try to group your training sessions by the technical and educational experience of your people.

The second "P" is to PREPARE. You, above all else, must know your stuff. You must know what it is you want to present and know the material better than anybody else that will be listening to you. You are the expert and must act that role.

You will want to prepare your people for the session also. You want to build a sense of excitement for the session so that they will want to come and be a part of the day. Be able to answer three questions for your people:

- Why are we meeting,
- What will we learn, and
- How long will it last.

Give everyone proper notice of the session and do it in such a way to really build it up. The location, time and dress code are a start, but add a few other things. Tell them why and what they'll learn. Maybe ask a few preparatory questions to tease them a bit about what they'll learn.

Have a prepared agenda, give all participants a copy and stick to the agenda as best as you are able. Set up an appropriate time structure for each of the topics. Remember that these people need variations in their routine. Try to vary the amount of time on each subject (40 min, 30 min, 20 min, etc.). And don't forget breaks. You don't need one after each session, but they need to be indicated on the agenda and adhered to. Remember that *the mind can absorb only as much as the seat can stand*.

Audio-visuals add tremendously to a presentation, but be sure they are appropriate to the level of your audience. Use professionally prepared and released videos. Watch out for videos that have been copied so many times that they are full of static. Also, look out for generic videos that are only partially applicable to your topic. Some sources put every disease known to turfgrass, for example, on one tape. Well, if you are caring for Kentucky bluegrass turf, you really don't want to spend a lot of time learning about Diseases of Warm Season Turf? Mix up your audio visuals. Do not use all videos. Do not use all audio tapes. You must use a combination of everything available, including handouts.

Let me make another suggestion. Some people have prepared training programs that are on video tape. They feel that if they put a trainee in front of a VCR for eight hours, they will have a well trained employee. After all, they have heard from the very best experts in every field speak to them on the tapes. I submit that all they'll really get is a well rested employee. Too much of the same thing is a guarantee for losing the attention of your trainee.

After your prepare, be sure you PRACTICE. Be sure you have a good feel for where the session needs to go. You want to know your talk inside and out so that in case you get asked questions, and get off track, you'll be able to jump right back in where you left off. If you don't have a good road map for where you want to go, you're sure to get lost. If you aren't used to speaking in front of groups, you need to practice, because it will show. It is a learned skill that you can acquire. Practice out loud in front of a mirror. What do you look like? Would you be kept interested by you? Are you doing anything weird with your hands or face? Watch your body language and mannerisms. Many of us do things that are very annoying that we don't even realize that we do. Watch out or you could turn what should be a serious discussion into a comedy.

Practice alone does not make perfect...perfect practice makes perfect. Learn from your mistakes and polish your presentation constantly. Be sure that you pace your talk appropriately. Use pauses for effect. Vary your tone and pitch to make an impact. A monotone is a sure fire way to send your audience into a deep slumber. You will become a better trainer as you do it more often, I promise!

The next important point is the PLACE you choose for the meeting. At times you may be presented with an option of where to have the meeting. Ask yourself, do I really have to have this meeting at the shop? A nice touch, that will help in setting the tone of your session, is to go to a local hotel and get a meeting room. For \$50.00, you can set up a nice session that will grab the attention of your employees. Be sure the room is big enough to handle what you need to do comfortably, being cramped is a big distraction. While not as serious, a room that is too big is also not great.

An outside location may not always be practical, but at least set aside a room specifically for the training. Do not allow any phones to ring in the room. Do not allow yourself to be interrupted during the session. Also, require a nice dress code. If your people know they have to come in decent clothes and not torn jeans and a T-shirt, they come prepared knowing that this is an important session and

that they better be prepared to learn. Be sure you are dressed accordingly as well. A shirt and tie is not over dressed to establish yourself as the expert.

The final "P" we want to keep in mind is the PRESENTATION' itself. Here it must all come together. The two biggest factors in having a training session really work well always comes down to the self confidence and enthusiasm of the presenter. If the speaker is ready and fired up, the session will be well received, no matter what else happens.

The session must start with a bang. How exciting can you make it? If you walk in and say, "OK, lets get going," in a monotone voice with a look like, "Man, I wish I were anywhere else," the class will take on that attitude and you're sunk. Your confidence will show by how well you use eye contact with your audience.

You should try to inject anecdotes and stories whenever possible. It just makes the entire presentation have a point and life to it. It will help show your technicians that there really is a point to all of this. Be careful of jokes, however. If you can tie in the joke with your talk, great. If not, its best to stay away from them. And be careful what kind of jokes you tell. You don't want to end up with a sexual harassment problem for telling a bad joke.

Speak the language of the people you are talking to. You are the expert. You know it and they know it. You don't have to impress people by using scientific or excessively technical jargon. Try to relate what you want them to know in a language and terminology that they will understand.

Finally, whenever possible, use other people as guest speakers. If you are not a particularly dynamic speaker, do your people a favor and don't make them listen to you for three days? Bring in a sales rep or other business associates to liven up the session. Use other people's talents to make your total presentation better than it otherwise would be.

Watching other people grow and develop is a wonderful feeling that the good teachers and trainers share in a very special way. Since you will be doing a lot of training, why not be the very best you can. It really is quite simple.

Just remember the five "P's" of an effective training session:

PEOPLE...PREPARE...PRACTICE...PLACE...and, PRESENTATION.