Making training interactive: One idea

By Joe Murphy, CCEP

Of all the things we compliance and ethics people do, clearly one of the most important is training and public speaking. As a trainer and speaker we typically want to engage the audience and make the presentation interactive. We know that is a goal, but is there more to it than simply saying, "any questions" at the end of our presentation?

I am sure there are many clever approaches, but I want to share one I have found consistently effective.

Perhaps you have had the experience many of us have had. We finish our talk and then ask if there are any questions. At least a moment of tense silence follows, but if luck is with us someone raises a hand. Or as we begin the talk we sense at least a few in the audience are more interested in their smartphones or are on temporary mental holidays. How do we engage them?

I start with some fundamentals. Whatever else the audience members like, they all like chatting with their neighbors. And while they may have a question or idea that relates to our topic, they may not be sure it is airworthy. So why not give them a chance to have that chat, but structured around your topic? Here are a couple ways this can work.

Let's look at the ending part. You have covered your points and now want to engage the audience. But perhaps you drew the down time right after lunch, or you were the first speaker Monday morning. How do you fire them up? Simply look at the audience and ask each person to turn to one neighbor, introduce themselves if they haven't done so already, and discuss one of the following questions. Either, "what did I discuss that you did not understand or want to know more about," or "what did I not cover that you would like to know?" That is it. Have them turn to each other, and instant magic happens. They open up, relax, and have a fun chat. The energy level shoots up. But they are all discussing your topic. (Don't worry if instead of just one neighbor it is 2 or 3 – the same magic happens.) Now, if someone does have a question, they have tested it out on a neighbor and it feels like a safe question. And they have started talking, so it is easier to continue by raising it in the group. Moreover, each person who before was alone now has a teammate; instead of "I have a question," they can more safely say "we have a question." The entire room will now typically be noisy.

If your audience is compliance people, we are typically networkers. So your challenge may be determining where to stop them. Listen to the room. You can even mix and mingle with them a bit – you may even be asked to clarify what you want. But when you hear the energy just dip a bit, it is time to bring them back to the front. This is just a few minutes. Don't be afraid to break the flow, because uninterrupted they could have this chat for quite a long time. Now you can harvest the topics from the group. You can call for hands or just pick groups to call for their comments or questions. Unlike individuals sitting alone, people in groups feel much more secure speaking up. If you have any problem now with discussion, it may be simply breaking off the discussion so you finish on time.

What about starting the presentation? Here we take the same philosophy, but add another point. If you are talking to a group, you should assume these are intelligent people and that each may have his or her own agenda. You can also assume that they know some things that you, even as an expert, do not know. Here is a starting approach that shows respect for the audience, shows that you are listening to them, and demonstrates that you are confident and flexible in your approach. It builds on a concept called the team agreement. You start with a flip chart or chalk board. You have each person turn to a neighbor or two, and have them introduce themselves. But the topic for them to discuss is "what do you want from this session?" That's it. You are telling them that they set the terms of what happens in the class, and that their views really matter. By listening to them and writing on the board what they want, you are showing respect and validating their views. And this is as it should be, because we in compliance and ethics should always be humble enough to listen carefully.

Harvesting their points is again fairly easy. They are all talking and have their ideas lined up. Be faithful to them in writing what they want. How and when you handle each question is your call, but be sure to stay aware of them during your presentation and respond to each. Thus, when you first post points from the audience, there will be some you can answer even as you write them down. Others will fit well into your prepared presentation, and you can say that you will cover that later. But as you go through each point you are in effect telling the audience that they matter and you are listening to them carefully.

Among other benefits of this approach is that you can surface what concerns the audience may have. For example, if your topic is X you may plan to explain to the audience why X is important. But after their input you may realize they already believe X is important, but need detail on how to do it (this has certainly happened to me.) There may be resistance or even hostility to your topic; doing this exercise will usually surface this right up front where you can address it. You can also learn from the audience through the questions and issues they raise. Be sure that by the end of your talk you have touched on each of the points you have boarded. It can be helpful to point out to the audience that you have covered their points, again affirming your respect for their opinions and interests.

I have found this works with every type of audience – field sales people and headquarters executives, government people and private sector, even audiences where English is a second language. As you try this see what works best for you. If you find some really interesting and effective variations, please let me know. I am always listening for new ideas.

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