

Everything I Needed to Learn About Training I Learned in Kindergarten

By Adrian Miller

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Some experts believe that the first few years of life are the most formative. Others suggest that the early teens are the most influential. Personally, I'm not so sure; there seems to be some good logic in both views. However, regardless of whether my personality was crafted as an infant or a teen, I can say one thing with confidence: I learned some very important things about training in kindergarten. Here's my favorite three.

Kindergarten/Training Principle #1: Don't Make Me Cry, Don't Make Me Turn Away

As a grown-up, I've learned to cope with many situations that, in kindergarten, used to outright floor me and have me screaming at the top of my lungs; or, at least, sulking in a dark corner, waiting for the chance to go home. And at the top of this coping list is dealing with boring or stressful situations.

When faced with boredom or stress, I'm now fully aware that the best thing to do is *not* to create a scene or start banging my arms down on a desk or carpet. That is, I learned to mask my true reaction – freaking out -- and replace it with a polite smile, or a stifled yawn. As a thriving kindergarten student, however, I hadn't quite yet honed this important coping skill; and so when faced with a situation that I found disagreeable, I expressed my feelings quite visibly, and some might say, quite honestly. I was unhappy, and believe me, it *showed*.

As a trainer, and as someone who has a vested interest in the growth and development of great training (regardless of whether I'm a part of it or not), I'm fortunate to carry around this kernel of kindergarten wisdom: people might look like they're not freaking out, but inside, they might very well be screaming and pleading for the day to end.

And with this insight, I've learned that I must be particularly sensitive to the energy and body language that I'm receiving from training participants. Sure, on the surface, they may look fairly composed; but that's just something we've all learned to do as grown-ups. Yet if I'm boring them, or if I'm stressing them out because my delivery is not engaging them, then I have to adjust.

For example, I may find it valuable to break up a large group into smaller groups if I feel that the room needs an energy boost. Or I might suggest an early break if I feel that I need to reestablish the goals of the training, and can more effectively do it after a clarifying and refreshing time out. Or, I may simply forego a planned presentation, and instead, open up the floor for questions and answers. There's no hard and fast rule as to what is needed; there's only the principle that, as a trainer, I must remember that on the

surface, my trainees might not be expressing their true opinion about the training. It's up to me to scan for this, and to make adjustments as I detect changes, both good and bad.

#2: Kindergarten/Training Principle Nap Time is Invaluable

Though different people have different kindergarten experiences, one unifying theme that bridges both generations and cultures tends to be the *nap period*.

Whether 10 minutes or half an hour, the majority of us experienced that special time in kindergarten where the lights were turned off, and the window shades drawn; and it was quiet, sleepy time. A chance to restore our spent energies, and return to the kindergarten experience with new and positive energy.

Until I became a trainer, I didn't give this any thought. I just figured that they told us to lie down because they were tired of the noise we were making, and needed a break. Yet eventually, the insight dawned on me that nap time served me *very* well. Nap time enabled my young, energetic, and sensory-overloaded mind and body to recharge. It gave me a stamina boost that helped me focus on post-nap activities, such as potato painting, or the all important sing-a-long. In other words: nap time served a primary strategic purpose (who knew?).

Fast forward to today, and I can see that the same strategic importance remains. Trainees need "down time" (if not necessarily nap time, though some do...). Training can be overwhelming; especially since, at heart, all training is about change. Since change is the most stressful thing that both people and companies experience, it's incumbent upon me to ensure that I know when my trainees are becoming agitated, and when a short time-out break is going to serve them well.

I'm also reminded that the capacity for people – not just trainees, but people in general – to learn something new tends to peak at about the 30 minute mark. That is, anything beyond 30 minutes, and the ability to accept and process information begins to wane. After an hour or so, I believe that it can be counterproductive to convey any information.

This isn't a negative situation; nor is it a critical observation. It's not that trainees don't want to learn, or that they can't. It's simple human tolerances. We aren't meant to sit for more than an hour and learn something; it's not actually within our biological development, if you really look at it. Can you imagine our cave people ancestors spending hours learning how to hunt and gather? They'd be eaten; or they'd starve, or both.

We've come along way since our cave days, but not as far as it may seem. We still need to learn things, obviously, but we *still* require frequent breaks. Though we may not yet be at the "nap time" stage in workplace training (though perhaps one day?), as a trainer, I can address this need nicely by ensuring that breaks happen frequently enough so that trainees stay fresh, alert, and engaged.

Kindergarten/Training Principle #3: You remember the good times

Though as adults we've have countless experiences, and each of those moments takes up residence in our memory, we can all probably hearken back to our kindergarten days to recall whether we enjoyed it or not. And as we reflect upon those enjoyable moments, we're overcome by a feeling of gladness; of a fond memory unraveling inside us. That's the feeling of an open-minded experience.

It's also fair to say that people who enjoyed kindergarten got more out of the experience than those who dreaded it. Though we don't cognitively recall what we learned or how, if we liked kindergarten – if we liked our teacher, and liked the atmosphere of where we were learning – we certainly learned much more than we realized. After all, even now as adults, often the most enjoyable and effective learning takes place when we *don't know* that we're learning. In such cases, we learn better because there's no inner resistance to learning; there's no mental labeling, or psychological border crossing official, who says "this is a learning experience, it is now entering your mind, please be aware and ensure that you want this to happen".

Seen in this way, a powerful insight that was brokered in kindergarten is that *people learn more when they enjoy themselves*. They not only learn more, but they remember more; and that is the key, since at some early point the training will end, and the trainee will need to apply what she/he has learned. If a trainee has a horrible experience, chances are she/he will retain only what is barely necessary; items that will help them keep her/his job (e.g. a new protocol or policy). But there won't be any real lasting growth as a result of the training; growth that goes beyond the framework of the curriculum.

Ensuring that trainees enjoy their learning experience shouldn't, however, be confused as providing trainees with a party or celebration each time. Some training is more formal, either because of the subject matter, or because of the environment itself. This is fine; and there's no need to necessarily have trainees doing the limbo and wearing nacho hats in order to create memorable training experiences.

Yet as I learned in kindergarten, this isn't necessary. Only as adults do we tend to equate "fun on the outside with fun on the inside". It's often not necessary; all it takes is paying attention to trainees and engaging them in the experience.

Some trainees will be highly extroverted and gregarious; others will be quiet and analytical. Some like to talk a lot on the spot; others prefer to take information back to their desks and reflect upon it for a few days. This is all fine. As a trainer, it's my job to use my skills and techniques – in partnership with the organization itself – to see that learners have an enjoyable experience, regardless of the environment or subject matter.

And it bears repeating, because it's so useful and so easy to forget: when trainees enjoy their training experience, they learn more, retain more, and achieve more.

And as a trainer, seeing that trainees learn, retain, and achieve, is the ultimate goal of what I do; and, in that sense, what kindergarten did for me, as well.

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