

Elements of Effective Training

A No-Nonsense Guide
For Modern Training

Ahmad ElShazly

**TO THOSE ON THE STAGE, INSPIRING US BY
PERFORMING THE BEST VERSION OF
THEMSELVES.**

A One-Word Guide

The whole process of effective training can be summed up in one word: **Purposeful.**

The Most Valuable Asset

Every marketer around the world is trying to get people's attention. Global advertising spending in 2022 is estimated at 781 billion U.S. dollars. Additionally, forecast data indicates that the ad spending worldwide will reach nearly 885 billion U.S. dollars by the end of 2024 (statista.com).

Why do all these people spend all this money? To grab a couple of minutes (or even a few seconds) of people's attention.

And you, my dear trainer, have that for a full training session, and you are probably getting paid to have it. Isn't that fascinating?

And what do most trainers do with all this attention they have? They waste 30 minutes asking about the weather and the football game, and another 10 minutes waiting for those who are late to the beginning of the class, and a couple of minutes after each break for people to collect themselves and get in the mood!

They're burning money! And, more importantly, wasting the most valuable asset.

Instead, let's spend this attention purposefully. Let's design every minute in the training class to enhance the student's experience. Let's have meaningful interactions, instead of small talk.

The Beginning

My friend Jeff is a professional cook. He's not getting paid to cook. He is a professional because he cooks everyday, with purpose.

Jeff's wife takes about 30 minutes to arrive home from work. So Jeff's goal is to prepare everything so that the duration between him starting cooking and the dishes to be served on the table is 30 minutes.

Jeff may start prepping the meal the day before. Get the frozen food out of the fridge to defrost. Prepare the ingredients. Or even before that, buying the needed ingredients and tools. Jeff puts everything carefully in place so that, when the time comes, it takes him exactly 30 minutes to finish.

The beginning of the effective training journey starts much earlier than the start of the class. Like cooks, trainers need to prep their sessions long before they deliver them.

I've found that there's an inverse relationship between the time you spend preparing for the session, and the time you waste during the session.

Jeff doesn't waste any time during cooking the meal because he prepped every minute purposefully. He made sure everything is ready before he starts, so he won't spend 10 minutes while cooking looking for a missing tool.

Trainers who don't prep enough will definitely miss one of the tools or resources they need during the session. They will then have to pause to look for it, or they will adapt and do without it. In both cases, the learners' experience has been lessened.

Purposeful trainings require diligent preparation. The process is so delicate that missing one element greatly impacts the end result. Other than the effort it requires to prepare a purposeful training session, it also requires emotional labor. And that's the tricky part.

Trainers need to think critically about the programs they developed. And judge the session's effectiveness from their ideal participant's point of view, not from their own. Good trainers spend the effort to practice the material. Great trainers spend the emotional labor to visualize each participant's experience and make it the best they could.

Purposeful Ice-Breaker

Don't talk about the weather.

Don't ask if they have seen yesterday's football game.

Well, unless your training is about the weather or about football, how's asking about the weather going to help your students with the session's content?

We need to start asking ourselves before each class:
what's the ice-breaker for?

Most trainers are too lazy to think about a purposeful ice-breaker. They settle with a question about hobbies, or a lazy game such as two truths and a lie. To be clear, saying my hobbies doesn't break the ice. If I'm a student, I don't feel more comfortable after sharing that I like to read, write and listen to music. The question in my mind at the ice-breaker activity is always: what's it for?

Purposeful ice-breakers serve the session's content. They create a smooth transition between participants' preoccupations and the session's content. A purposeful ice-breaker makes you delve into the session without realizing it. As an attendee, you're now focused on the content, got to know one or two of your classmates, and ready to listen.

Be Clear About the What

Don't ask the participants what their expectations are for the session. Unless you've already told them what to expect, how would they have any realistic expectations?

It's usually a lazy question that means you didn't prepare your intro well enough. Another problem with this question is that it invites unnecessary conflict. If the participant's expectations are different than the session's content, the conflict is now public and must be addressed. A rough start, indeed.

Instead, state your intentions clearly. State what's going to be covered, and to what extent. This way, your participants will reset their expectations based on what you just said. Conflict avoided.

It's also relevant to state the *how*. Draw a clear map in your student's mind about how the session is organized, and what elements you'll be using throughout the class to deliver the *what* you just explained.

Be Clear About The Why

Being assertive about how this session will help your participants is essential. You must be clear about the reasons why participating in your class will help them. More importantly, you must be clear how each fact you present throughout the session will help them.

You should make it a habit not to present facts independent of their utility.

Remember your maths class in middle school? If you're like the most of us, your teacher probably just introduced the facts of the subject. The utility of those facts are not necessarily obvious to the students. And this is why most students don't like maths at middle school. In fact, maths is a very interesting subject if you learn it right. Maths is why the device you're reading this book from is possible.

Learning facts independent of their utility is a chore. Learning a useful, practical fact, on the other hand, is always welcome.

Pro Tip: You may encourage a purposeful discussion about the value perceived from the session after you clearly state the topics covered. "How do you think learning about this will help you?" Agreeing on a personal benefit right from the beginning of the class earns you the participant's commitment until the end.

Lead Purposeful Discussions

People learn when they are talking, not when they're listening.

They learn better by producing, not by consuming.

You may have read a few books last year. How many titles do you remember, let alone the books' content? You probably do not remember the book you read a few weeks ago. A friend recommended a book to me once and I it sounded interesting. I went on to my "goodreads" account to add it to my "to read" shelf only to find it in my "read" shelf! I was surprised that I didn't recognize a book I have already read. That moment was an eye-opener for me. We can totally forget a book we have read and liked. We minimize the chances of forgetting something by discussing it with intelligent peers.

As much as we (trainers) would love to be the source of knowledge (isn't this why people attend our sessions?), people actually learn from peer-to-peer interactions more than they learn from the teacher. It's critical for the session's success¹ that the trainer spends less than half the time talking, and allows the participants to participate more than half the time.

In fact, it would be ideal for the trainer to only talk 20% of the time. By designing the content in such a way that participants will have to *work* their way through 80% of

¹ Measuring success here by participants getting the maximum learning outcome from the session.

the content on their own through discussions and activities.

Depending on the subject, the kind of discussions will vary. It's easier to lead discussions for non-technical subjects (such as communication skills); where intelligent participants already have some idea about the session's content from their daily lives. Since the participants in a technical training by default don't know much about the subject, the trainer will have to take the discussions beyond the technicalities; discussing the customer experience, or the thought process that led to the product.

Ask thoughtful and well-placed questions, and interfere only to redirect the discussion when needed. Using various types of questions gives the trainer control on the discussion's direction. Use open-ended questions to encourage divergent thinking, and closed-ended questions to pull the participants to converge in a certain direction that serves your goal.

Design Purposeful Activities

I could spend a whole month talking you through how to ride a bicycle. I could show you graphs and amazing videos for each part of the bicycle. I could even get world champions with a bicycle into the classroom and ask them to ride it in front of you.

You'd still fall off once you try it yourself.

You may have a lot of information about how to ride a bicycle that you will be able to make a full presentation about it, post videos online about it, or write a book about it.

But you still can't ride the bicycle yourself!

The only way to learn how to ride a bicycle is by riding a bicycle. You need to practice it.

It's not information you need to learn how to ride a bicycle. You need to develop a skill, instead.

Designing purposeful activities for the participants to practice the skill is the only way you can get them to learn it. Such activities vary from simple teach-backs to gamified experiences. How fancy the activity is doesn't matter as much as the fact of having the activity.

Effective Activities Necessitate Feedback

Merely practicing doesn't work if there's no feedback system to correct participants when they go astray. Otherwise, some participants may be practicing very well in the wrong direction. The feedback system could be designed to be self-generated or trainer-led.

In basketball, if you're practicing free throws, you know you're doing a good job as long as the ball hits the net. That's self-generated feedback system. If the ball doesn't hit the net, you adjust and try again until it does. And then you try to repeat it until the results are consistent enough.

On the other hand, if you're asking the participants to teach their peers about a piece of technical information you just explained, you need to listen closely and make sure they're not misinforming their peers. In such situations, the trainer's feedback is critical to maximize the benefit and close the loop. You taught them. They taught their peers. You approved or made a correction. Now everyone knows a little more about what they learned, and feel safe about the validity of the information given to them by their peers.

Tell Interesting Stories

Think about these three questions:

What's your favorite movie?

Why is it your favorite?

What was its story?

These questions are easy to answer although they are not simple. The movie's plot is not simple, but you remember it anyway. Why? Because it was told as an interesting story.

Storytelling may be the most underrated art in the training industry. By learning to tell a good story, you can greatly maximize the training session's impact.

In your training classes, the participant needs to be the hero of the story, not you. The class is not about you. It's about them. Not as a group. But as individuals.

Good trainers tell *the group* a good story.

Great trainers tell their story to *individuals*, sensing each participant's reaction while telling it; measuring if it resonates, spotting the highs and lows, looking for individual cues of enrollment and adjusting accordingly.

Don't give them a lesson. Give them a story to tell.

Good trainers captivate their audience by their good stories.

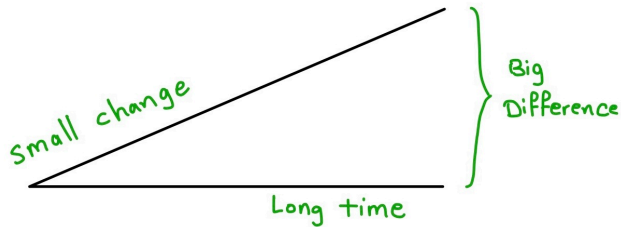
Great trainers, however, give their audience a captivating story to tell.

You can take your story to the next level if you make it *their* story. What story are they going to tell themselves after attending your training session? Try to recall a moment that changed your life before. The most influential moments you had were probably not in a formal training session. Sometimes it's just a phrase someone had said to you that resonated with you because it gave you a story to tell yourself.

How do you know that your training session had any impact on your participants? My favorite after-training moments are when participants approach me telling a story about themselves that's relevant to the session's content. It indicates that they have *internalized* the concepts discussed or its practical value in their lives.

As educators, we can't ask for more!

Make it easy for them to start a habit



Habits are key to sticky results.

Helping a person build a specific habit is the single most impactful thing you can do when helping people. We spend almost half of our daily life in habitual behavior. The rest of our behavior happens around those habits.

If you want to live a healthy lifestyle, develop healthy habits.

If you want to lead, develop the leaders' habits.

Seth Godin inspired dozens of people (including myself) to start blogging everyday. This single habit has helped me, over the years, to crystalize my thinking, understand myself better, and develop the skill I used to write this book.

As explained by Charles Duhigg in his bestselling book, *The Power of Habit*, a habit consists of a) cue, b) routine, and c) reward. You'll have to choose a certain routine they need to do and a certain reward they'll get by

<https://shazlys.blog>

consistently doing it leaving the cue for them to pick, or choose a cue and define a reward leaving the routine for them to pick.

If you leave all 3 factors undecided, it will be too much work for the average participant, and they will probably pass on developing the necessary habit.

The new habit doesn't need to be big, or difficult. Tiny habits are usually a perfect start. Imagine that you're going from A to B. The road is a straight line. If you make the slightest deviation from that straight line, and keep at it long enough, you'll reach a whole different destination.

Ask Learners About Their Takeaways

What was the most useful thing you learned today?

What are two takeaways you have from today's session?

What are two ways you can apply what you learned today?

Asking learners to reflect on the session's content and actively choose the key information they feel most useful helps them to internalize the information they learned and increases the chances they will commit to a lasting change.

On the other hand, it gives you an instant feedback on what resonated with them and what didn't. Perhaps the one thing you're hoping everyone learns never comes up while they're answering the question. This gives you an opportunity to reiterate it once more and work on improving your message in future sessions.

More Than a Teacher

Modern training requires a complex set of skills. A few hundred years ago, if you wanted to learn something, you'd shadow with someone who knows how to do it. Let's say you want to learn how to make a sword. You go work for a smith, watch what they do, and try your best to learn from them.

The smith may not be the best storyteller and he had no idea what a computer is. And that didn't matter.

Not anymore.

Today, training requires more than being the best in the world in what you train.

A trainer is:

- A teacher.
- A student.
- A technician.
- A thought leader.

Trainers as Teachers

Your main goal as a trainer is to teach your participants something they didn't know before (provide information) or allow them to practice something they already knew (develop a skill). We are used to thinking that we spend most of our time playing the teacher role. But that is not true.

Trainers as Students

We spend most of our time learning, researching, and consuming content. Trainers read a lot, listen a lot, and watch a lot. They are observant to their environment. Constantly analyzing and critically evaluating what's happening around them.

Trainers who think they're good enough they don't need to learn anymore soon will become obsolete. If there's one constant in the world, it's that it's always changing. In the modern world, this change is much more rapid than it used to be a hundred years ago. Which means our job as teachers requires greater efforts as students.

Hence, curiosity is one essential characteristic for great trainers. They're always keen to explore the unknown, and delve into uncharted territories. It's the only way for us to remain relevant. Like being trapped in a river, you need to exert effort to stay afloat.

A good trainer is a good teacher.
A great trainer is a good student.

Trainers as Technicians

There are all sorts of tools you need to make your training more effective. Knowing how to use these tools is essential to your competency as a trainer. On the other hand, being overwhelmed by them is something you'd want to avoid.

Focus your attention on the tools that would make the learners' experience more convenient. It's a good idea to have a tool for them to document their ideas and lessons learned. A paper and a pencil can do the trick in the physical environment. A Google document can be your go-to tool online, or you could go for a more sophisticated option such as Discourse. Knowing your way around the computer is one essential skill. Mastering online learning and using tools such as Zoom and Mural is critical for online engagement.

Remember: which tool you're using matters much less than its relevance to your purposes. Serving your purpose is the only criterion you should consider when considering which tools you will use.

Trainers as Thought Leaders

The information is free, and accessible everywhere. As long as the person has internet access, they can get the information they need very easily. Why should they get it from you?

You need to build your credibility with your audience by producing your own thoughts and work to the world. you could build your credibility in one of two ways:

- Your track record speaks for you. You've achieved great results before and you're transferring your vast experience through your training sessions.
- You produce relevant content. You write books on the subject, have a podcast, a blog, ... etc.

The best approach is to mix the two. Usually, people who are very successful are very vocal about it. They show up on interviews, write books, or even participate in documentaries about their own life and work. You probably don't have this much of a track record yet.

In this case, producing relevant content is the best approach to build your credibility slowly and steadily. Thanks to the internet, there are no entry barriers. All you need to do is start typing, and people will start to look at you differently. You're not copying people anymore. You have your own style, and that's priceless.

If you don't know what content to produce, you could follow Gary Vee's advice. You could document your learning journey to those who care to follow you. Exploring with them instead of giving them ready answers. We tend to underestimate the weight of

documenting the journey. We tend to feel like we should have more to give. This feeling could cause us to freeze. Essentially, it's fear of not being enough. Fear of appearing vulnerable. Fear of failing to find our audience.

If we document our journey long enough, the right audience will find us. Same as you found this book.

The Trainer's Purposeful Checklist

Make sure all squares are checked before each class.

As mentioned in our first chapter, the trainer's journey begins way before the beginning of the class. It's useful if you start checking off the boxes once you start prepping for the session.

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Relevant ice-breaker. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Clear objectives. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Clear value proposition. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Purposeful discussions are meticulously designed. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Engaging activities for practice. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Lessons are formed in a single interesting, coherent, and relevant story. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Provide habit cues, rewards, and routines. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Ask for takeaways. |

Finally, I want to ask you:

What was the most useful thing you learned from this book so far?

What are two takeaways you have from this book?

What are two ways you can apply what you learned from this book?

Send your answers and comments to: shazly.04@gmail.com.