

Go ahead. Make me learn

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It happens, sooner or later, to every classroom trainer. One resistant learner can ruin your day. Two or 3 can make you wonder if you chose the right career. When you lock eyes with a troublemaker at 9:20 a.m., it helps to remember that you have very little control over some of the things that cause learners' resistance. There is always the chance that the fabulous innovation to which you are introducing the learners is, in fact, a dud. However, sometimes trainers are more responsible for learning resistance than they like to admit.

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[Headnote]

No matter how good you are in the classroom, some days your pearls of wisdom fall into a room full of . . . mules, let's say. Here's how to think on your feet and deal with resistant learners.

It happens, sooner or later, to every classroom trainer. For Pat Weber, it happened most memorably a couple of years ago when she was hired to give three one-day workshops to a group of Virginia police officers on the subject of her specialty, customer service. Unbeknownst to her, the officers were fuming over a badly handled internal salary survey, and their resentment at management spilled over onto her. Weber found herself facing a sea of hostile learners, all in full uniform-including their guns.

"They didn't want to be there at all," says Weber, who has run a training consultancy in Williamsburg, VA, for eight years. "They were not having any fun. They were prisoners. Finally, one of the officers stood up and let it all out: 'Why are you telling us about how to treat customers? You don't know anything about customer service!'" He shouted at Weber for a full 10 minutes.

After the first daylong workshop, Weber called the city manager who'd hired her to ask what in the world was going on. Then, armed with the full story, she reorganized her remaining two-day sessions to emphasize interpersonal communications rather than customer service.

"I let them know that I knew they were not, themselves, as internal customers, being treated the way they were being taught," she says. But that didn't mean the training was unnecessary. Police officers develop a unique perspective in regard to customer service, Weber says. "Even if you're a victim, you're a problem. They needed customer service

training, but it had to be framed as interpersonal skills. They needed to know that you don't use the same tone with the victim as you do with the perpetrator.

"Changing the focus kind of took the juice out of some of the resisters thank goodness. I'd never had someone throw darts at me like that."

Living With Resistance

One resistant learner can ruin your day. Two or three can make you wonder if you chose the right career. Randall Buerkle, a principal in Flagship Consulting in Tipp City, OH, still shudders at the memory of an orientation class in performance management in which his students, all freshly hired out of college, covered his handouts with particularly unpleasant caricatures of him-which he found all over the classroom during break.

"It eats at you for weeks," he says. "You've got to find a way to live with it and live with yourself."

"I know that when I talk to my training friends, the topic of resisters comes up a lot," says Patricia Simmons Noden of Step-Wise Training in Falls Church, VA, who teaches business communications and English as a second language. "None of us knows what to do about it." She herself was utterly nonplussed when, in one ESL class, a student from China (angry, she surmises, about being put in a beginner's language class) raised his hand during the introductions to challenge her command of English.

"I didn't know what to do. I just threw back my head and laughed," she says. "Can you imagine going to China and correcting a native Chinese speaker's pronunciation of his native language?"

Alas, many trainers can imagine that-and worse. Like the woman who took cell-phone calls in class, conspicuously whispering into the receiver all through one of Weber's sessions. ("You could have paid me \$10,000 to teach that class, and it wouldn't have been enough," Weber says.) Or the group of reporters that Susan Boyd, a consultant in Jenkintown, PA, remembers, who were being forced by their bosses to switch from the Dos-based word-processing program they'd been using for 20 years to one that worked on Windows 95-and who had to carve out training time amid the unrelenting deadlines of a daily newspaper. Or the unrepentant student who says he read comic books (hidden in his textbooks) all through high school in India, and ran gin rummy games in the back of his college classrooms at Indiana University.

Actually, that last fellow is now a trainer, not a trainee-one with 30 years of experience, no less.

"I was always a resistant learner," says Sivasailam Thiagarajan (better known as "Thiagi"), who owns Workshops By Thiagi in Bloomington, IN. "It was partly because I was capable of multitasking, and partly because I was always two steps ahead of the slowest learners in the classroom; as you've probably noticed, teachers always align with the slowest learners. I just wanted to be left alone." Now, he goes out of his way to flush out people like himself.

"I tell trainees, 'Do anything you want that helps you learn-move around, play cards [he'll pass out decks on request], read the newspaper. I won't take it as an insult.'" The human brain can process information 10 times faster than the ear can hear, he tells them. And people are never in a situation where they can't learn.

"Everyone wants to learn, but in their own way," Thiagi says. "As long as you don't force-feed the way you want to teach them, they'll be fine. No one is really in resistance mode; learning is the natural way to be." He pauses. "At least, that is how I deny reality."

Causes of Resistance

When you lock eyes with a troublemaker at 9:20 a.m., it helps to remember that you have very little control over some of the things that cause learners' resistance. You can't manage the personal elements in learners' lives that spill over into the classroom-the sick child, the tyrannical boss, the impending balloon payment. Nor can you change the fact that learning anything new is inherently scary to some people, "taking them from competency to incompetency," as Boyd puts it. What you can almost always control, trainers say, is your response to them.

Then, too, there's always the chance that the fabulous innovation to which you're introducing them is, in fact, a dud. If you're training on customized software, for instance, the new program that's supposed to be the greatest invention since ice cream may actually contain a time-wasting flaw. In that case, it's important that the instructor, rather than defending the system, own up to the error-the more creatively, the better.

"I pass out play money at the beginning of my classes-\$10 for showing up, for coming back on time from break, or for asking questions-and I pay extra for any system enhancements suggested in class," says Boyd, who specializes in computer training. Then she sends any suggestions for improvement to the software designers. In the most dramatic example of a turnaround she's seen, a correction her students suggested on the first day of a training workshop showed up in the software on Day 3.

Her approach works best, Boyd admits, with custom software, but she wouldn't rule out passing on ideas for improving an off-the-shelf product: "They're always looking for suggestions, and it might come out in the next version. But I don't go around doing market research for Microsoft."

(A training tip: Boyd also "pays" learners for their own in-class mistakes, maintaining that when you're going from, say, Windows 3.1 to Windows 95, it takes a full six wrong clicks before you learn that the "close window" button that's on the far left in 3.1 has moved to the far right in the 95 version.)

Some professions, like sales, bring pressures that can be inimical to any training that takes learners out of the field. If, while they're sitting in a classroom, somebody else is out there selling to their customers (and collecting the commission they're losing), "sometimes it's a better decision for them to go back and serve the customer," Buerkle says. "I tell them, 'Just go.' I can easily justify that to their manager."

Our Own Fault?

That said, sometimes trainers are more responsible for learning resistance than they like to admit. For instance, sometimes when learners complain that a class doesn't fit their needs and is wasting their time, the reason is not that they are being mulish. The reason is that the class doesn't fit their needs and is wasting their time.

"A lot of times, people should resist training," says Jane Ranshaw, who has gone from training on computer software to training on soft skills (like business writing) in 22 years as an independent consultant in Chicago. "We've all been sent to things that were just dumb. People want your course to be good; they want you as the instructor to be good," she says. When they slam you on the feedback sheets, "they're right more often than we'd like to admit. If an activity doesn't work, it might be a dumb activity. If a discussion goes awry, it might be because you don't know enough about how the company works to lead the discussion.

"People say these things not to be hard on you, but because they genuinely want to improve the class," she adds.

Buerkle suggests that instructors "sometimes create our own resistant learners by being too dry or too controlling or too flippant." He practices "preventive maintenance" by varying his format to catch learners offguard-like using breaks to play the tapes of classical-music parodies he records in his spare time (he's a former nightclub singer), to which he adds silly words to reflect the business situation he's teaching. One typical number is sung to a Haydn suite, with harpsichord accompaniment: "Help! My computer just went crash/I'm about to throw it in the trash!"

"I don't use everything in my toolbox in all situations," he says. What's important is staying flexible, and being ready to switch gears at the first sign of boredom. "You really have to be nimble on your feet."

Patsy McFadden, training administrator for the Arizona Department of Public Safety, agrees. Over the past two years, her department has deliberately changed the way it delivers state-mandated training to engage more learners, varying its traditional lecture format with interactive and group activities-and using the resisters themselves as key participants.

"People will be disinterested to the degree that you allow them to be disinterested," she says. "Somebody whose boss has sent them in for communications training is a typical 'prisoner.' If they need extra attention, I make sure it's positive, not negative-get them involved, give them something active to do. I get them engaged emotionally, either with humor or with some kind of 'wow' at the beginning. I break them into groups, because they're not going to be nearly as ugly with their peers as they might be with you. You have to be real good at reading people."

Thiagi makes sure that he always has on hand at least three ways of teaching the material-for instance, a lecture, a game, and a self-instruction module. He's ready to switch at a moment's notice. No matter how interesting the activity, he says, "people get tired of doing the same thing for a long period of time." In his opinion, many instructors who

complain about reluctant learners "are just covering up their own stupidity/their inability to engage the learners."

Caught in the Act

So you're in class, sailing along nicely, when suddenly you realize that more than one participant is eyeing you as if measuring your head for the taxidermist. What do you do?



How Many Resisters?

Of the experienced trainers we talked to, only one advocated reliance on divine intervention—ignoring the potential interruption and praying that the resistance goes away. Everyone else suggested going on the offensive, with the aim of bringing the resisters out into the open.

"If I sense that anything might be leading into a hostile situation—the way they walk in, sit down, talk to each other—I'll hand out a piece of paper," Buerkle says. On it, he asks participants to write down a number from 1 to 10 that expresses how much they want to be in class, then explain why they put the number down (like "I'd lose my job if I left"). Then he collects the papers and goes through the results right there. "It's a practical way to get everybody to safely say how they're feeling, and it lets me know what the climate is," he says.

When Boyd hears snide comments about the software she's teaching, she organizes what she calls a "corporate whine." She sets her kitchen timer (standard equipment in her training bag) for two minutes and tells the class: "This is your time to whine about how slow the system is. After this, I don't want to hear about it." Hokey, maybe, but it works. "You'd be surprised how much energy it takes to whine for two whole minutes, and how much laughter is generated," Boyd says.

Thiagi, who's clearly not afraid of loud noise, uses a similar activity that he calls a "shouting match." Or he might have the class line up, first in order of an arbitrary characteristic like height, then in order of "their reluctance to take this course"—with the caveat that they have to communicate their reluctance without speaking. Or he asks them, as a favor to him, to brainstorm ways to sabotage the workshop ("Spread your doom and gloom! Make everybody miserable!"). "That usually shocks people, and they come up with all kinds of diabolical approaches," Thiagi says with satisfaction. Then he might ask them to turn each of these suggestions around—from how they could destroy the training to how they could contribute to it. "That catches them in the act," he says. "It reminds them that they are partially responsible for what they get out of the workshop."

Have a Plan, Sam

Some trainers find it helps to have, in the back of their minds or on a cheat sheet in front of them, a series of sequential steps for dealing with disruption. Shawn Scheffler of Leawood, KS, a program developer for the American Management Association (which conducts soft-skills seminars nationwide), came up with just such a list last year for an AMA course he designed, Training Adults: Achieving Results That Last. For handling "contrary audience members," Step 1 is to ignore the disruption, Step 2 to walk toward the source, Step 3 to make eye contact, and so on down to Step 7, to discreetly ask them to leave. But in Scheffler's five years of training experience, he has found that instructors almost never have to go beyond the third step.

Boyd has also developed ii "potential solutions" to deal with resistant learners, although they're not meant to be sequential. In addition to the "corporate whine," and the playmoney rewards, they include: sharing your own feelings when you first encountered the software program you're teaching; rescheduling an individual for a different class; remembering that crabbiness can be a reaction to a lot of things, not just to you; and making sure you don't embarrass anyone in front of the whole class.

Being ready with a witty comeback to a complaint is fine, if you're a witty-comeback kind of person. Jane Neumiller-Bustad, an organization development specialist for Despatch Industries in Minneapolis, recalls a class in negotiating skills she gave at a military base in Texas. "Talk about resistant learners!" she says. "At one point late in the second day, when I became a little frustrated with the 'Why do we have to be here, learn this, etc.' thing, I started to walk around the class peering under desks and looking puzzled. Since I was six months pregnant, this was an interesting sight." Finally, somebody asked what she was doing. Her husband was a cop, she told them, so she had seen her share of handcuffs and, strangely enough, she couldn't find anything chaining their legs to the desks. "So why are you still here if you're so miserable?" she asked them. "Hey, this is America. You have total freedom to come and go as you choose. I'm enjoying working with this class, but if you want to leave, by all means leave."

Given the choice, they decided to stay, "and it actually turned into a very interesting and fun class," she muses. "It was a key lesson for me as a trainer. So many trainers get caught up in the fluffy-people-warmth thing....But when we try so hard to make sure everyone has a good time, we do ourselves and our profession a disservice. The learners bear total responsibility for their learning."

But if you're just not cut out to be a comic, don't force it. "The best thing that would work with resistant learners is humor, but that won't work for me; I'm just not a naturally funny person," Noden says. Recognizing her limitations, she finds that taking disruptive people aside at the break and asking them to tone it down is just as effective. "I'm here to facilitate the learning process," she says. "Any behavior that supports that process is OK. Any behavior that disrupts it is not."

Confront 'Em?

Ranshaw winces when she remembers the times she's confronted reluctant learners during a classroom break. For her, this remains a last resort. "In my experience, direct confrontation, even privately, rarely works," she says. "There is no real opportunity for face-saving." She does it only when disruptive behavior makes it impossible for others to learn. Nine times out of 10, another class member will address the situation first.

Thiagi has the same philosophy. "Assuming that a small minority do not like what I am doing, I trust the process and trust the participants," he says. "What inevitably happens when somebody is acting out and you get defensive is that everyone turns on you. If you keep calm, keep teaching, ignore personal attacks, everybody in the room is going to turn against the troublemaker. As long as you believe in what you are doing and you believe in the group as a whole, they will take care of the resistant learners."

This presupposes, however, that most people in the group perceive some value in the class you're trying to teach. There is nothing like relevance for preventing learning resistance. In keeping with the customer service training she conducts, Weber goes so far as to create a 10- to 15-minute pitch to sell a potentially resistant class on a particular topic—"a 'What's in It for Me?' piece," she says. She also keeps her examples as fresh and to the point as possible.

For a workshop at one large hospital, Weber explained the high cost of not pleasing a customer by expressing it in actual dollars. She told the group that one unhappy patient, on average, tells enough people about the experience that some \$30,000 in revenue is lost for that year. "For front-line people, \$30,000 is your salary," she says. "We told them, 'It's either you or your customer—which do you think your boss is going to choose?' It's not the most comfortable way to persuade people, because you're appealing to what they're afraid of. But it was a way to let them know that we were serious, that customer service wasn't just 'smile training.'"

She stops, and sighs. "I didn't realize, when I started, that so many people would have to be buying into why they were there."

The Gift of Criticism

Time and again, the trainers we talked with emphasized that the real issue is not what we can teach resistant learners, but what they can teach us.

"I've learned that criticism won't kill you, and that you just may learn something," Neumiller-Bustad says. "The first thing I do is look at myself. What could I have done to better prepare for the class? I find I have to be very, very well-prepared: Talk to people ahead of time, go into the organization, walk around, talk to people about what they do. Then, in class, I can use the particular processes I observed to show how the training relates to everyday life."

Ranshaw says she uses critical feedback sheets "all the time" to tweak her programs into shape for the next time she presents them. And Thiagi goes so far as to suggest that the resistant learner just might end up being the most rewarding student in your classroom.

"Don't think of reluctant learners as a pain; think of them as a valuable source of feedback," Thiagi says firmly. "Every reluctant learner has a lesson to teach you-although sometimes you are not exactly sure what the lesson is. They are much better colleagues than the happy-go-lucky Mary Poppins people.

"People ask me, 'What if the game fails?' I tell them: 'No instruction ever fails. Sometimes, however, you get feedback from the real world.'"