



Managing learner motivation in class

A good instructor can turn prisoners into tourists, tourists into keepers

All safety practitioners at one time or another will be required to lead a training session of some kind. Whether it is a formal course on incident investigation and causal analysis methods or an informal tailgate talk on how to wear hearing protection, all safety practitioners eventually have to take on the role of teacher.

One of the most challenging aspects of being a teacher is recognizing and managing the varied learner motivations in your classroom. A learner's motivation may be better alternatively described as his "readiness to learn." A group of 20 learners will likely have a range of motivations for learning, not to mention as many as 20 different personalities and potentially be at 20 different levels technically or academically. If you are not ready for this variability or do not recognize this diversity, it sets the stage for a challenging experience for both you and the learners.

A starting point in getting this right is to recognize and manage what is best described as the three levels of motivation: the "prisoner," the "tourist" and the "keeper." Prisoners may have been volun-told to take the training. That is they really don't want to be there, they are not interested in

the topics and are not really ready to learn at all. They are stuck in your course and are forced and unwilling participants.

Tourists see the training as time off from real work and are happy to go along for the ride even if their intention is not to actually learn anything. They will no doubt enjoy the refreshments at the break but they are not likely to contribute very much. With the right interaction, however, they can become interested in the content.

The keepers are ideal learners who are highly motivated and ready to learn. These learners do not need to be formally engaged or challenged to keep their interest up. However, they will be demanding and expect a quick pace to cover lots of content. Recognizing these three different levels is the first step in the process of having success in the classroom.

It is the teacher's job to, at the very least, make tourists out of prisoners, make keepers out of tourists and keep the keepers keen. It is not enough for the teacher to exhibit an enthusiastic interest in the topic and demonstrate strong motivation for the process and learning opportunity. In fact, an overly keen instructor may drive more tourists to become prisoners and turn off some of the keepers. A

more calculated approach is required.

The best way to deal with prisoners is to find them right away; maybe even by making small talk with course participants before the class starts to try and seek them out. Get to the venue early and manage an informal meet and greet. Read tonality and body language — sitting stoically with crossed arms is a tell-tale sign of a prisoner. Engaging prisoners early and asking them to share ideas or experiences in a one-to-one discussion may be all that is needed to convert them to tourists. Prisoners do not like to be publicly singled out. By talking to them one-to-one and showing them you value their experience, they are more likely candidates for conversion.

It is important to focus on prisoners early because if left to their devices and not managed, they can become disruptive and really drag down the experience of the whole group. If you are successful during the pre-course activities, all prisoners will have at least been converted to tourists by the time the course starts.

It is hard to sort the tourists from the keepers before the course starts. Tourists often can feign interest and be mistaken for keepers; after all, everybody is a little happier on their days off. For the tourists, your course

is just another day off. The best way to find the tourists is to try and engage the entire group early on in the course. The super enthusiastic participants, the keepers, will be easily identifiable. If you do formal introductions at the beginning of your course, the keepers will stand out from the rest. If you have been successful at determining who the prisoners are before class starts and the keepers present themselves during the course introductions, the tourists can be identified by a simple process of elimination.

Tourists can be engaged and then converted by helping them figure out the WIFM: "What's in it for me?" For the tourist, there needs to be some materiality of the course. Explain to them why the course content should matter to them. They need to understand how the content being presented will fit into their work world. So, the first part of the course needs to be built with the tourists in mind. If the purpose and relevance can be explained, you will convert the tourists into keepers.

Inevitably, your turn will come when you will be asked to lead a training session or toolbox meeting of some kind. Your challenge as the leader and teacher will be to recognize the varied motivation for learners to learn. Although having an array of motivations in the classroom can be challenging, it is also what keeps the job of the safety practitioner exciting. If all students were keepers, it might be easier but it may quickly become a boring job. If you find it difficult at first to determine the different motivation levels, don't despair; it is extremely challenging for even the most effective teachers to read the learner cohort and figure out who are the prisoners, tourists and keepers.

But it will be even more difficult to reach all learners if you cannot first assess their motivation and work with each group to move them towards the motivational level of the keeper. The finest teachers are excellent at differentiating between learners. Your success and their success depend on it.

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