

An introduction to the art of training

Help people learn new skills

A10 Articles series: Management

This article was first published on the website in April 2005 and last updated in December 2024. It is copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

This is a basic introduction to what skill training is all about.

The article offers advice and encouragement to all who want to run a training event in their church or Christian mission. This might be a mid-week evening, a Saturday morning event or a course of several sessions. It is designed for clergy, other leaders, managers and trainers of any kind.

In a church the event might be for home group leaders, bereavement visitors, flower arrangers, youth club helpers, or those who lead intercessions or read lessons in church services. In a Christian mission the sessions might cover aspects of employment legislation, the introduction of new software, child protection, motivating volunteers or managing staff. You will be able to add many other possibilities to these lists.

To lead a training event requires a different skill set from that needed for a preacher or speaker. This article has five parts:

- 1 What do trainers need?
- 2 Those you are training
- 3 Getting the room right
- 4 Constructing the event
- 5 Learning exercises

1: What do trainers need?

First of all, what is training? It makes sense to know what you are trying to do before you start. If you are a highly disciplined person, look away at the end of this sentence and write down your own answer before continuing to read the next page of this article.

No, I didn't really expect you would do that, so you will now find my answer. I believe that a training session should provide:

- **understanding** about the topic;
- **motivation** to undertake the task;
- **skills** for doing it well.

In other words, something for the head, something for the heart, and something for the hands (or whatever body parts are required to carry it out). So this article has the same three-fold aim.

Any trainer therefore needs to be:

An EXPERT – to give understanding

Not *just* an expert of course as we shall see in a moment, but the trainer needs to have a firm grip of the topic itself, have thought about it carefully, and preferably have plenty of practical experience in it.

I would not make a good trainer in bereavement visiting. I could probably bluff my way along for some time, but it would only need one good question from a delegate to blow my cover.

An ENTHUSIAST – to give motivation

A deep understanding alone is not enough. A trainer who does not believe passionately in his or her topic is unlikely to make people rush out and get on with the job. Enthusiasm is not something to be faked. It should come out naturally and without effort from the trainer, if it is there in the first place.

In a church setting I would hope that the enthusiasm would be for the value of this ministry in God's work. So a good trainer in flower arranging would, I trust, have a longing to see arrangements showing God's creative beauty as an aid to worship.

An ENABLER – to give skills

Excuse the jargon word, but the temptation to include a third E was too great! The trainer needs to be able to impart skills so that people can go out and put them into practice.

This calls for further skills in the design of a training event, and then some way of ensuring that something happens afterwards. The success of a training session can only be evaluated some time later.

From E to C

But there are at least four other points to make about training, all of which call for skills in the trainer. Training is all about:

COMMUNICATION

See this both in terms of the trainer's presentation but also in the other direction too: a good trainer is a good listener and observer. A training session is no flat, uni-directional piece of speech-making. It is a dynamic time when the trainer's plan for the session is being continuously modified in the light of feedback, using all possible senses.

CHANGE

The trainer is seeking to provide new understanding, new attitudes and new skills. You need to create some measure of dissatisfaction with the present so that people want to change for the future. Many of us are too comfortable doing things the way we are used to doing them, and we need a great deal of help to see that there may be a better way.

CAPABILITIES

The aim is to raise individual capability (including the trainer's). There will also be a real sense in which the aim is to raise the corporate capability, of the church or mission as a whole.

CONTEXT

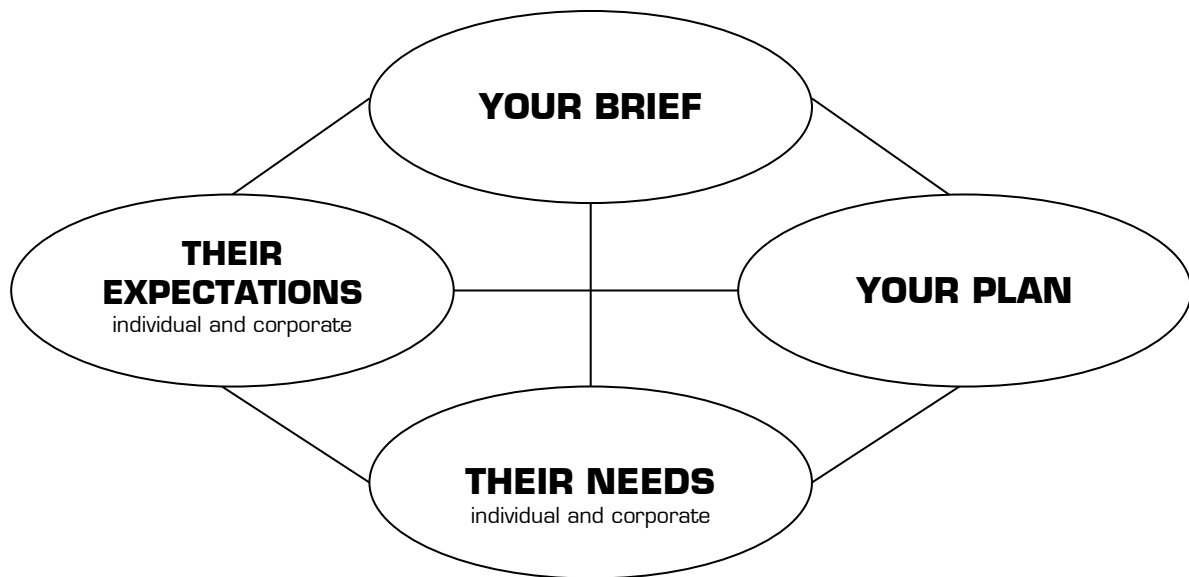
Your training needs to treat seriously the Christian context you are working in. It is not good enough to add in a few Bible verses or just to take secular training and transpose it into a church or other context. There needs to be serious theological thinking about the topic and an understanding of how Bible study and prayer should be treated within the session.

By now you will appreciate that training requires a broad range of skills. At one event I ran for professional church trainers we came up with the following (before we all offered our resignations!):

- flexibility in approach;
- design of events;
- experience in using necessary equipment;
- letting those being trained feel *they* did it (rather than the trainer);
- self-knowledge;
- vulnerability;
- the gift of encouragement;
- an ability to engage with people;
- an ability to judge the best level of control;
- creativity;
- a real sense of humour;

as well as everything in the teaching, presenting, listening and observing areas.....

2: Those you are training



Some trainees will be nervous, others will be looking forward to the session. Some may object to the idea of the need for training (“I’ve been a youth leader / caterer / lesson reader for 20 years so why do I suddenly need training?”).

If it is a week-night evening, some will doubtless be tired and may have rushed out from putting the children to bed or getting in from work. Some may have heard that things like ‘role play’ always happen at these kind of events and be doing everything they can to be ill, or double-booked, or dealing with a sudden and quite unexpected crisis in the family.

It is helpful to keep four things in your mind, linked together by imaginary elastic so that each one can influence the others (see diagram).

YOUR BRIEF is to the job you have to do (eg. “to train the young people’s leaders”). Try also to express it in terms of where you want people to be after the event compared with before.

YOUR PLAN is the way you intend to do this (eg. a series of one evening per term covering how children learn, how to prepare a session, etc.).

THEIR EXPECTATIONS are the hopes and fears of those attending (possibly a wide range from old hands who feel they know it all, to newcomers who are desperate for some practical help).

THEIR NEEDS may be clear – or they may be hidden to them and, initially, to you (eg. it may come to light that some are completely out of touch with current educational practices).

So your plan has to take into account your brief,

their expectations (which may change as the event goes on) and their needs (which may become clearer as the event proceeds).

Assuming you know the group (advice for a session where they are strangers would need to be more extensive), here are some hints as to how to develop a relationship with those you are training. The aim is for them to come to trust you, and for you to discover their needs and meet their expectations.

- Prepare everything (room, equipment, etc.) in good time so that you are relaxed at the start and can chat to people as they arrive rather than rushing around up-front.
- Explain what is going to happen during the event, say when you are going to finish (and stick to it), and let people know what they are allowed to do (“do ask questions at any point” – if this is so).
- Trainers need to be in touch with their group, so avoid hiding behind a table or even a lectern if possible. Any furniture or equipment creates a barrier.
- When leading try to keep eye-contact with the group rather than burying your face in your notes (which shows you have not prepared properly). You can then adapt your style as you see how people are reacting to the material so far.

Otherwise, all normal points about public speaking apply. But training is not the same as preaching a sermon. There should be a large amount of interaction, and frequent changes in dynamic.

3: Getting the room right

Here is a checklist to run through for any training session. If you are running a two-hour evening event in your own church, several of these will not really affect you (unless some of your group are coming from other churches). But they are all points to bear in mind when choosing a venue. Some become much more important for a full day event.

1 **Accessibility, parking, travel directions**

You don't want people to arrive flustered – especially if they are nervous as to what this session is going to be like. Put yourself in their shoes.

2 **The feel of the building, the entrance, the signing, the loos**

These may be outside your control but are still important.

3 **The reception, the welcome, flowers, music, etc.**

The aim being to put people at their ease. People usually relax if they feel everything is under control.

4 **Refreshments, any meal, crockery**

The right choices can show you are taking this session seriously (even if just quality biscuits to go with the coffee).

5 **The size and shape of the room**

You often have to put up with what there is, but the ideal size gives enough scope for the group to sit together, to break down into sub-groups, and to move around if certain exercises demand this.

6 **The décor, carpeting, etc.**

A bare church hall should be avoided if at all possible. A carpeted room with normal ceiling height is best for groups that are not too large.

7 **The door in and out of the room**

Aim to lay out the seating so that late-comers are not embarrassed and do not disturb others by coming in at the front.

8 **The coffee hatch**

There is nothing worse than the sounds and smells wafting in as you approach the middle point of the evening!

9 **Visible clutter**

This can be a real issue in many church venues. Tidy it up as far as possible to avoid distraction.

10 **The chairs**

Plastic ones are best avoided if at all possible. Aim for comfort without getting to fall-asleep luxury.

11 **Tables for delegates**

For smaller numbers these add formality but give a sense of professionalism. They are great if you are expecting people to be writing notes.

12 **Layout of chairs**

I spend some time getting this right – usually a wide, deep arc with as few rows back as possible. Everyone needs to be reasonably close to the trainer.

13 **Positioning audio visual equipment**

Consider sight lines and daylight. If using a flip-chart it goes on the right as the audience faces the front, if you are right-handed. Try it the other way round and you will get the point.

14 **Windows**

Consider lighting, sunshine (where will the sun be later on, not just at the start?), and visual distraction (if there is movement outside, such as a road, try to keep the audience facing away).

15 **The clock**

You should see it – they should not!

16 **Be prepared for other distractions**

I've had bell-ringing practice, weddings outside the window, rock bands rehearsing next door, and much more!

4: Constructing the event

A training event (or 'workshop') is, at heart, a learning experience that includes interactive work. The aim should be to offer a variety of learning methods so that everyone finds something that works well for them.

So a one-hour talk by the leader followed by questions is not a training event. It's a seminar. This is perfectly valid in itself, but not what we are discussing here.

But it would also be a mistake to think that a training event is simply sessions of input from the leader, broken up by various exercises to keep everyone happy (or not as the case may be!). These 'exercises' should be designed with care and introduced with thought so that they build on the input that has just gone before or prepare people for what is to come. They are not the equivalent of commercial breaks. See section 5 for more on exercises.

The construction of an event is a fine art. Flinging together a few activities does not make a good training event, even if people enjoy it and go home happy. The aim has to be centred on learning. True, we want people to enjoy the process. But what matters is what they learn and understand and then apply. Trainers need to beware playing to the gallery.

We look first at the overall design. Here are ten guidelines.

1 **Block the time into sessions**

Aim for sessions from three-quarters of an hour to an hour-and-a-quarter, and break them up in some way (eg. with refreshments). So an evening or a half-day event will have two sessions, a full day event will normally have four.

2 **Divide these sessions into clear units**

Most sessions need to have two or three units within them, with clear dividers (eg. headings in notes, a recap and fresh start by the presenter). Never let the group get lost in your structure.

3 **Keep the dynamic changing**

Within these sessions, try to change the dynamic at regular intervals: from presentation to group work to presentation to questions.... Different people learn in different ways.

4 **Include time for summaries**

To help people learn there needs to be plenty of linking to what has gone before, summing up a unit, answering questions, and reminding people of where the whole event is going. But there also needs to be what I call a 'learning log', getting people to list the new points they have already picked up from the event.

5 **For full day events, watch lunch!**

If you are running a full day, timetable lunch reasonably late as people learn more before the break. If you have any control over the meal (eg. at a conference centre), try to avoid anything too heavy. Treacle pudding spells disaster for the first session after lunch!

6 **Move from input to activity**

Aim for key input to come early rather than late, and for any main activity to come nearer the end (after lunch on a full day). But it is a good idea to close with a sharp input session to wind up the whole event.

7 **Think bullet points**

As you prepare your input, imagine it in bullet point or numbered format (like this list) rather than prose. Most people learn more easily in lists with headings than in long discourses.

8 **Surprise people from time to time**

... but without threatening them. A change of content or style, a new activity, putting something in a new way, looking at an issue from a different perspective: these are all means to hold people's attention and avoid the event becoming boringly predictable.

- 9 **Use imagination and some humour**
Training should never, ever be dull. A relaxed setting and some humour can help, but be yourself. I'm hopeless at cracking jokes, so I have to remember not to try. I use other means to introduce humour and I try to think up new ways of putting material across.

- 10 **Keep to time**
People are relying on you to allow them to get away at the stated close time, so aim to stop ten minutes before then. And if you are behind schedule, it is usually more important to leave material out than squeeze in those last three points that you feel everyone needs to hear.

Equipment and note-taking

The basic item of equipment for training remains the flip-chart or white-board. This allows the whole group to provide the input together as the event proceeds, rather than a 'here is something I prepared earlier' approach by the trainer.

A good group for training will usually be about 5 to 20, well within flip-chart size. If it is more than 30 it is moving away from interactive training into seminar or presentation size.

I find PowerPoint an over-hyped method of communication. It certainly has its uses for presentations, but it quickly loses its value when it becomes the standard tool for everything. As a trainer I rarely use it, preferring instead to provide printed notes for everyone so that they can take the wording home with them afterwards.

By all means use it for a presentation as part of a training event, but use it with imagination, and in small doses. It has become the standard tool for the presenter who lacks expertise and enthusiasm.

I don't find it helpful if people have to spend time copying notes off a board or screen. It is much better to give them the outline in print, and let them add their own wording to supplement this. They will learn more this way. Don't despise a printed outline – but don't give everything away in it or you become unnecessary.

For further thoughts on this topic see Training Notes TN52, *The perils of PowerPoint*.

5: Learning exercises

A key element of a training event is the choice of exercises to help people to learn. Don't overdo these, and see them as additional ideas to normal interaction between trainer and trainees in questions and discussion.

Fundamental principles

PURPOSE

Never use an exercise unless you know precisely why you are including it. Never use an exercise just to create a break. It must have a learning point in it, and the trainer needs to be crystal clear about what it is trying to teach.

SIMPLICITY

Unless you are a pro, keep things simple. There is less to go wrong, and often it's the simplest exercises that are the best.

GROUPS

Most exercises are best done in groups of between two and five people. Consider carefully how to form the groups.

THOSE PRESENT

Know your trainees. Do they know each other well or not? Will there be some who are especially sensitive?

PERSONAL DIGNITY

The leader is in a position of power, so seek never to misuse it. Honour people's dignity. If anyone is going to look a fool, ensure it is you.

TALK-BACK

The real learning may only take place in the talk-back of the exercise. This is a crucial stage and most of us skip over it too quickly.

REALITY

Exercises need to be relevant and realistic, or the impact is lost. People need to be able to relate the message of the exercise to their own experience of the topic being covered

Exercise types

Here is a short selection of types of exercise to get you started. In my own events for trainers I would usually add in several others as well, but it is worth mastering these first.

A Good and bad lists

Groups of three list good and bad points about how they have seen the topic in hand being carried out. For example, for lesson reading: "What features make someone a good lesson reader – and a bad one?"

It is so much better if these practical points come from them rather than you. But what matters is your off-the-cuff response to each answer from a group.

B Different setting

In groups people give their experience of the topic but in a different environment. For example, for an event on working as a church team: "What (secular) sport or activity teams have you been in which were especially good and what made them good?" It may help quieter people to have been given notice of such questions in advance.

C Boot on the other foot

Similar setting. For an event for church welcomers, you might ask, "How do you think a complete stranger feels as they walk up to our church door for a Sunday service?" You are trying here to help people see things from a different perspective.

D Biblical material

Similar setting. For an event on communication, you might ask if people can list the different ways that Jesus communicated to various groups of people. During the report-back you might then distinguish between the disciples and the crowds, and then list the lessons to learn today.

E Multiple-choice answers

Something for people to carry out singly: give out a sheet with questions and four possible answers for each, only one of which is right. These can be culled from some research document, and the aim is to help people discover what is really happening. For an event on child protection something from a statistical or medical background would be possible.

F Discussion groups

After input on an issue, give groups some provocative questions to answer.

Examples during a children's leaders event might include: "Is it better to tell a Bible story in your own words changing any cultural setting to one that the children can relate to, or to read the story word for word from the Bible and explain the meaning of any strange settings which the children would not be used to?" Or "Our syllabus should focus on the Gospels rather than the Old Testament. Do you agree?"

G Case studies

These are made-up scenarios when you ask people how they would tackle the situation. They can be very simple, such as (when training home group leaders): "At the start of the evening, an emotional member of your group shares in great detail, as he did at the previous two meetings, about the terrible time he is having at work. How would you deal with this?"

Or they can be quite complex (when you have described a situation on a printed sheet – eg. for bereavement visitors, a detailed description of the person they are visiting and what happened last time they called – the group has to decide how to tackle this next visit.)

H Observation

Showing people pictures or objects, or asking them to watch a DVD clip or listen to a short recording can all be excellent learning exercises.

For events on communication, I have used a clip of the previous night's TV news or given out copies of different national newspapers for that day, to see what techniques we can learn from the professionals. Watch copyright if you try this.

I Priority order

A useful technique is to give people a list of items and ask them to choose priorities or put them in order. The learning here is often more in the process of discussing what matters most than in the final answer (where there may not be one 'correct' version anyway).

When training churches on how to present financial accounts in a way people can understand, I sometimes give a list of 20 possible pieces of information to quote and ask groups to choose the five that are the ones that really matter. To make this more fun, you can print out the items on cards so groups can sort

the cards rather than just looking at a printed list.

J What goes wrong

'How-not-to' exercises can be amusing. In a communications day I might present groups with a church press release which contains a whole range of appalling errors (it is not difficult to make these up – just copy one from any church!). Or in an event on spoken communication I might act out a how-not-to set of announcements.

Groups here should not only list what is wrong, but then rewrite or re-enact it in a much improved form.

K Just do it!

Many training events benefit from a straightforward session when people are simply asked to put theory into practice in a real way. So an evening on lesson reading can end with

people being asked to read a passage aloud, trying to apply all the lessons learnt. Or a session for flower arrangers can include having a go at a particular arrangement.

There are of course many more types of exercise you can choose and I have deliberately omitted some of the more advanced ones (such as role play, team games, drama, simulation, master classes) where you need to have plenty of experience or things can go badly wrong.

Any of the above can be combined with each other to good effect (a DVD clip of people in the group reading a lesson, discussion groups using multiple-choice answers, and so on). The possibilities are endless.

Remember, though, that different people learn in different ways. An exercise that is just right for one person may not work for another. What is important, therefore, is to keep a balance of different types of learning experience over an event so that there is something for everyone.

Worth doing well

Training people can be one of the most rewarding tasks I can think of. It involves all the satisfaction of teaching (with those who want to learn) coupled with the on-going application, and so people's growth and development. Add in the Christian dimension and the potential for future ministry, and you have something of real value. Provided the topic is one that excites you and the ultimate purpose is clear, it is so worthwhile to seek to improve your skills in it.

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A10. See also Articles A19, *Speaking so that people listen*, and A43, *Every member on active service*, plus Training Notes TN52, *The perils of PowerPoint*, TN71, *Seatings for meetings*, and TN103, *How to encourage creative thinking*. See also the series of DIY training aids in Articles A49, A52, A54, A57 with more to follow.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A10 under Management (with a link to Communication).

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>