10 Reasons Your Trainees Don’t Listen to You

Many companies don’t realize that they can be liable for injuries caused by employees who drive drunk after an office party (or another company-sponsored event) at which alcohol is served. Even companies that know the risk exists don’t fully understand the exact nature of their potential liability and how to manage it.

As a safety trainer, the supervisor knew full well the importance of listening to instructions and procedures. But when he was on the receiving end, he didn’t practice what he had preached. On the other hand, the disconnect between the supervisor and the sailing instructor wasn’t all the supervisor’s fault.

The Communication Gap between Trainer and Trainee

Wouldn’t you hate to have somebody like that supervisor who tunes you out as a trainee? Well, guess what? You probably do. Chances are, your safety training sessions include at least one or two persons who aren’t getting your message.

Why aren’t you getting through? There is no one answer to this question. On the contrary, there are a variety of things that can cause trainees to tune out their trainers. Here are 10 reasons that training messages don’t reach their target:

1. **They Really *Can’t* Hear You**

There’s nothing more frustrating than to deliver what you think is a clear message only to have it ignored. It’s as if the trainee doesn’t hear you. In fact, maybe he doesn’t. Do you mumble? Are you dealing with an employee with hearing loss? When explaining procedures, speak slowly, loudly and clearly. And make sure trainees are literally able to hear them.

2. **You’re Speaking Greek**

Don’t assume your students understand more than they do. Define any words which may be unfamiliar. Give them all the information

you can. If you're not sure how much background knowledge they have, you can say something like, "This may be familiar to you, but let's go over it again."

3. **They Hear the Message but Don't Understand the Reason**

Many trainees want to know not just what but *why*. This is especially true if you're trying to get them to adopt a change in procedure or technique. Explain the purpose behind the change. Otherwise, trainees may not accept the change and do things the same way they always have.

4. **They Don't Appreciate the Stakes Involved**

Before explaining a safety procedure, point out the hazard involved. It makes a lot more sense to wear protective gloves when you know about flesh-melting chemicals.

5. **Your Jokes Are Garbling the Message**

Humor can be an important tool in training. But you don't want to overdo it. If you kid around too much, it may be hard for trainees to tell when you are serious. Don't hide behind jokes when delivering difficult messages. Your audience might not get the point.

6. **You're Not Listening to their Questions and Concerns**

Give your trainees lots of chances to ask questions. You can gauge the level of understanding by what they ask. Never laugh at questions. Respect your trainees and help bolster their confidence. If there are no questions, don't assume everything is understood. Trainees may have nothing to ask because they don't understand what you were talking about.

7. **You're Not Tailoring Your Message to Who They Are**

Differences in literacy levels and culture may make it difficult for you to communicate with your trainees. Be sensitive to these differences and look for ways to bridge them.

8. **You're Not Testing Their Comprehension**

A big mistake trainers make is assuming that the message has been comprehended without verifying it. Ask the group to repeat the message back to you. “Okay, now what is the procedure for disposing of oily rags?”

9. **You’re Relying Too Heavily on the Spoken Word**

Different people have different learning styles. Some need to hear. Some need to see. Others need to experiment hands-on under your supervision. Still others won’t learn a thing until they get their hands on a training manual. Most need a combination of these methods.

10. **You’re Not Anticipating Obstacles**

There may be roadblocks to following your instructions. Force of habit and uncertainty about what is expected are common ones. Maybe the trainee doesn’t have the tools, equipment or procedures to follow through on what you said. Look at things through the trainee’s eyes and try to anticipate these difficulties.

Conclusion

Of the 10 errors listed above, the supervisor’s sailing instructor was guilty of at least one: the last one—failure to anticipate obstacles. He overlooked the fact that his trainee’s lifejacket wasn’t fitting properly. To be fair, as a safety person, the supervisor should have known better than to wear such a lifejacket. But he’s not the first trainee to make a mistake. Hopefully, all of you do a better job than this sailing instructor in catching mistakes.