

Thinking through co-training

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Key learning points

- **Why co-train?**
- **Thinking through co-training.**
- **Working out your natural training style.**
- **Mixing and matching styles.**
- **When co-training works best.**
- **Pitfalls to avoid.**
- **Top tips.**

Why co-train?

Do we train with another trainer because we get tired and need a break? Or do we do it because there are benefits for our delegates in having more than one person's input within their training experience? Actually, both of these can be true. There are also other very good reasons for co-training, but let me explain these two reasons in a bit more depth first. A mix of approach and trainer style, combined with the harmonics of different people's voices, may help delegates to absorb and remember information, as variety gives the brain a natural

break. Combined with a change of pace, it helps you refresh and relax delegates quickly and easily. 'A change is as good as a rest' is very true in training.

Training is tiring. With the responsibility for your delegates – physical, psychological and emotional – firmly on your shoulders, as a solo trainer you really are a one-person show. Working with a supportive colleague, and being able to share these responsibilities, will make training a smoother and more enjoyable experience for you. Then there is the advantage of having a spare pair of hands around to help with whatever needs to be done – always useful in an emergency and, as trainers, we've all had those.

If large numbers of delegates are being trained on the same programme, a bit of clever timing with the schedule allows simultaneous training to occur seamlessly, using parallel sessions, and permits large-group plenaries in which delegates can learn from each other. Delegates

also enjoy the social side of having a larger group of people on the same programme; it encourages social interaction and communication, and it can be used as a vehicle for fostering a competitive spirit between the different groups, if appropriate.

Co-training gives the second (and third) trainers the chance to observe delegates in more detail than the lead trainer will have time for, and is often an opportunity to provide the lead trainer with useful in-depth feedback on their performance. Co-training also affords an excellent opportunity for an experienced trainer to give a lead to a new, or less experienced, trainer. One final reason for co-training is that it gives delegates a choice of trainer to talk to if they have any problems or issues, or if they need a bit more help or clarification. Often a female delegate will prefer to talk with a female trainer, for example – particularly if their issue is of a personal nature.

When co-training works best

Although some of these points are rather obvious, you would be amazed at the frequency with which they are ignored. Regardless of personal style, co-training works best when the trainers like each other and are well rehearsed.

The very best co-trainers are experienced at working together, to the point where they will often finish each other's sentences. They will support, reiterate and add to what their co-trainer has previously said, and they will do this seamlessly, smoothly and professionally. When colleagues like and respect each other, it is obvious to everyone who sees or hears them. This is never more true than with two trainers. Critically, the relationship and the dynamics between co-trainers influence the whole mood of the training and the state of the delegates. When the trainers are having fun, the delegates are more likely to have fun. And when delegates are having fun, they learn more easily and quickly – they are more relaxed, and a relaxed brain makes more connections.

Co-training works best when the training materials have been designed with natural breaks to allow for a natural change of training style. Timing is important

here. Unless your delegates are very engaged with the material, one and a half hours is the maximum amount of time they will be able to concentrate for. In fact, based on research using the latest brain-scanning technology, some neurologists are beginning to suggest that the brain will begin to switch off if there is no change of pace or interest after about 20 minutes. This is one of the reasons why different training styles and different voices – that complement rather than clash – also help to create a more successful training experience for your delegates.

Pitfalls to avoid

- **Contradicting your co-trainer.** This is a cardinal sin which will confuse and upset delegates.
- **Messy changeovers.** 'Oh, I thought you were going to do that bit' isn't professional, and shows a lack of preparation.
- **Running over your allotted time slot** so that your co-trainer doesn't have enough time for

their session. The delegates may not realise what you have done, but your colleague may not forgive you for some time.

- **Not being able to answer questions as well as your co-trainer on the sections you are delivering** – unless the delegates know that you are a 'trainee' trainer; or your co-trainers are specialists in a particular area, in which case use the questions as an opportunity to learn more yourself.

Tip

Preparation really is the key. Don't try to wing it in your training until you really know both your material and your co-trainers.

Tip

Remember the 3 Ps: Planning, Preparation, Practice.

“Working with a supportive colleague ... will make training a smoother and more enjoyable experience”

Author

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Jump-start your thinking

To help you think these points through, I have posed them in question format. Reading them will jump-start your thinking.

- 1 How do you structure the training so that it flows smoothly?
- 2 How does each trainer's natural training style fit with the energy, flow and format of each of the training sessions?
- 3 Which trainer particularly wants to deliver which items?
- 4 How are you going to organise the handovers between trainers?
- 5 Which parts of the training do the less experienced trainers need to learn or practise, so that they can provide cover and so that the trainers become professionally interchangeable?
- 6 What contingency plans do you need to put in place, in case one of the scheduled trainers can't make it?
- 7 Who writes the training notes and handouts – does each trainer write their own?
- 8 How do you manage the trainers' different natural styles within the training notes?
- 9 Which contact details do you give the delegates – each individual trainer's, or one central contact point?

Working out your natural training style

Are you more of a type A trainer or a type B trainer? Use the table below to find out your natural training style. Score 1 point if you agree with the statement and $\frac{1}{2}$ point if you partly agree.

Mixing and matching styles

Even though you may have a mixture of both styles, you will probably find that you have a clear preference for one style over the other. Unsurprisingly, you will find that those delegates who are most like you in their own personal style and approach will enjoy your training more than that of a trainer with the opposite style. So what does this mean in practice? That you can train only those delegates who match your style? Or that you should always co-train with a trainer who has the opposite style? Luckily, the answer to both of these questions is 'No'.

You will probably have noticed how flexible your delegates are. I shall risk making a sweeping statement, pointing out that this means they will always make every effort to learn what they are meant to from the trainer they have, regardless of that trainer's personal



training style. Certainly, they may prefer to learn from someone who is like them, but this is because it's much easier to learn from someone who is on your own wavelength. If you are working with, or being trained by, someone who thinks in the same way as you do, you don't have to 'translate' what they say into a format or a style which is meaningful. They have already (very helpfully) presented everything in a way that makes sense to you.

Master trainers flex their natural style so that they are able to deliver great training to all delegates. For example, even if they would prefer to go off at a tangent, they don't do it all of the time. Rather, they have a strategy of 'training in loops'. This means that they come back to an interesting point to reiterate it and explore it further, slightly later on in the training, which gently reinforces it for delegates. Naturally, although they will follow the set agenda, they do so flexibly rather than rigidly, and they will build exploration time in to the training day, so that they can pursue any item in which the delegates have expressed a particular interest.

However, if you are working with a trainer who has not yet developed a flexible training style, and their style is very different from yours, potentially you could both become frustrated and unhappy. The first step towards resolving this and creating a more effective working relationship is

for each of you to understand each other's natural training style.

The second step is to divide the training up equally between you, so that each part of the training suits your particular style. In this way, you can both work to your personal strengths and you will begin to enjoy working together much more. Because you will both be learning from each other, the natural progression of this is that you will begin to respect the value and benefits of each style. Your mutual respect will make your delegates feel much more comfortable.

The next steps are for each of you to practise those parts of the training which come less naturally to you, in order to develop your flexibility; a progression of this is to take the opportunity to co-train with as many other trainers as you can. Finally, learn to recognise what type of delegates you have, so that you can deliver what's best for them, and not what's easiest for you.

Tip

If you have to train with someone whom you either don't like, or don't rate as a trainer, you have two choices. You can find a way of not working with them. Don't share sessions; you will just find that frustrating. Let them do their part and you do yours. The second choice is to reframe your relationship with them in a way that is helpful to you. If you don't, the delegates will notice that your relationship isn't working. They may become side-tracked by it or, worse, they may complain if the relationship affects their learning and they feel that it isn't professional. By always being supportive, picking up the pieces if you need to, and tying up any loose ends, you will become a better trainer, win the hearts and minds of the delegates, and be much in demand as a co-trainer.

Type A trainer		Type B trainer	
Low energy		High energy	
Sequential thinking		Go off at a tangent	
Detailed and meticulous		Less detailed and not meticulous	
Very reflective		'What's done is done'	
Happy to train the same course again		Like every course to be different	
Very prepared		Do a bit of preparation	
Too busy to learn		Always seeking to learn new things	
Prefer to follow the agenda closely		Believe that the agenda is only a guide	
'Wait and see what happens'		Very proactive	
A lot of nervous energy		Very laid back and relaxed	
Always on time or early		Rather last minute or late	
Quiet and reserved		Extrovert and outgoing	
Maintain a professional distance		Make friends with delegates	
Dislike surprises		Like surprises	
Total		Total	

