Encouraging Discussion with Questions

Discussion can be a trainer's best friend because it involves trainees in presenting and explaining the content of the seminar. When trainees can answer the discussion questions intelligently and understand the main points of the question, they are ready to take an exam.

Use discussion questions to begin your presentation, to facilitate discussion during your presentation, and to summarize content at your conclusion. We believe that discussion among the trainer and trainees is critical to group understanding and acceptance of the technical content. That's why you'll find these open-ended discussion questions for *Residential Energy*, the field guides, and the *Comprehensive Home Energy Curriculum* (CHEC) in the later chapters of this *Trainers Guide*. CHEC modules contain the related discussion questions on the last slide of each module.

Discussion questions open minds and encourage participation.

Discussion questions serve as our training objectives. If a trainee can answer a discussion question intelligently and correctly, then the trainee will probably answer a test question correctly. The test questions and discussion questions are related to each other.

Here are some specific ideas about how to use discussion questions.

- Write discussion questions on a white board before class starts.
- Pose rhetorical questions during class to liven up your presentation.
- Hand discussion questions out in class as a homework assignment.
- Choose a set of discussion questions to lead a guided discussion on a particular topic.
- Leave the discussion questions on the screen after you finish your presentations and are answering questions.

Dealing with Disruptive Trainees

Trainee behavior is an important part of the learning environment. Disruptive trainees can disrupt the learning environment and create chaos. Try these techniques to quell disruptive trainees. Start at the top of the list and work your way down.

- Ask all trainees to limit their stories to a minute or two. Appeal to fairness so that all will have equal time to relate their stories and concerns.
- If someone is talking to others around them, address discussion questions to the disruptive trainee.
- Go and stand by a disruptive trainee and conduct your seminar from his or her territory for a while.
- Call for a short break, or wait for a scheduled break. Talk to the disruptive trainee in private, tell them why their behavior is a problem, and ask them to stop the disruption. Tell disrupters that you will spend extra time at the seminar's conclusion, if they have bona fide questions or concerns.

- Make a personal plea for moderation to the disruptive one in front of the other trainees.
- Invite the disruptive trainee to leave.

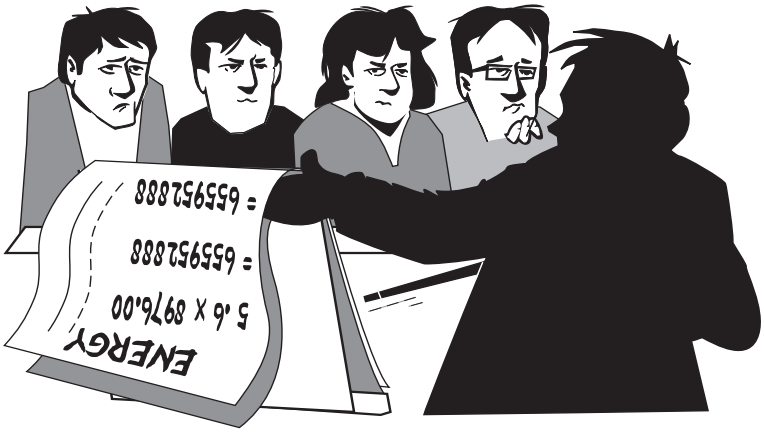
Some of these techniques may seem radical, but the learning environment is your responsibility. Remember how much it costs to put people in a classroom. Who will take responsibility if you don't?

Advocating Change

Trainers are often called upon to advocate change. Change is difficult for most people, and they will resist it. Advocating change implies that the current practices aren't adequate. Technicians who have been performing a task a certain way for their entire career aren't happy to hear that their method is not the best practice. Your statement of a problem may imply that your trainees have been negligent or incompetent, unless you set the right tone for discussion. A seminar can turn sour quickly unless you are prepared to justify your position with a complete and believable explanation, and also to rationalize past failures so the trainees feel that you aren't blaming them.

The example of duct air leakage is a good one. For many years heating technicians installed leaky ducts because it wasn't known how leaky ducts affect energy usage, health and safety, and comfort. Trainers are overcoming resistance to change by the following carefully reasoned rationalization.

1. Technicians installed leaky ducts because no one understood the substantial negative effects, and the extent of the leakage wasn't known.
2. When technicians started measuring duct leakage and realized how important it was, this was a big surprise to everyone.
3. Who could have known how much energy leaky ducts were wasting and how much comfort and health was being sacrificed?
4. Now that we know these effects, it is time to take simple and direct action to improve the performance of forced-air systems.



If your audience is angry, distraught, or confused, don't try to communicate your message until you do what needs to be done in order to make them more comfortable.

If you present a sequence of events like this you will note first anxiety, followed by relief, and finally understanding and acceptance. At least that's the way it's supposed to work. Remember though, that change is difficult, and you better have the complete backing of the organizations, supervisors, and experts that your trainees respect.

If you must be an agent of change, it is important to understand the challenges and frustrations of your audience. Sometimes training is better suspended temporarily, in favor of an airing of concerns and complaints, that will help dispel a negative feeling hanging over your seminar.

Telling Stories

Stories are extremely valuable for stimulating audience interest and personalizing difficult technical topics. Especially valuable are stories that demonstrate why the current topic is important in the real world.

The audience should identify with the story and it should have an impact on their feelings. Like other forms of presenting, stories can get overly elaborate, confusing, or boring especially when the audience can't relate the story to your main topic. Pick stories that relate the topic to real human beings, their homes, their health, and their money.

For example, on the topic of moisture you could tell any of the publicized stories of people getting sick in their homes from mold spores. Some tens of thousands of lawsuits are pending nationwide against builders for building conventional homes, that for one reason or another, have moisture problems. One particular family had only a little mold in their bathroom and several family members hospitalized with life-threatening asthma attacks. Yet there are many families who have standing water in their crawl space and no sickness. Pay attention to stories like this, especially when you are directly involved, and you have the basis for some highly relevant classroom discussions.

Good Trainer Behavior	Poor Trainer Behavior
Show your enthusiasm.	Exhibit apathy.
Tailor your presentation to trainees' knowledge, experience, and values.	Consider your presentation universal and pay no attention to trainees' characteristics.
Be democratic and flexible.	Be autocratic and rigid.
Admit when you don't know the answer.	Bluff when you're stumped or avoid the question.
Use trainees' names and know something about them.	Focus on your own viewpoint, and neglect personal relations.
Take active responsibility for the training environment and trainee comfort.	Consider the training environment as someone else's responsibility.
Recognize organizational problems in the classroom. Discuss and mitigate them.	Ignore organizational problems, frustration, or anxiety among trainees.
Encourage questions and comments.	Discourage questions and comments.
Guide discussions along the path set by the outline and agenda	Neglect discussion, or allow uncontrolled discussion.