



This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

Adult Learning Principles

They're Essential to Learning Anything

One of the biggest misconceptions in the professional world is that if you are an expert on a certain topic, then you can be a trainer. Nothing could be further from the truth. Understanding a topic does not necessarily translate into knowing how to *help others learn* the subject matter as well as you.

In truth, the secret to any successful training, workshop, breakout session, or brown bag event, is for the trainer to either reacquaint him or herself with, or perhaps learn for the first time, the presentation skills that will make participants look forward to the next training they attend.

Some Presenters are More Skilled than Others

Certainly some professionals who lead trainings are already very good at it! Maybe a quick refresher about some key points is all that's necessary in these instances. If so, that's great! But that isn't always the case. Some presenters were tapped by their superiors to facilitate trainings because they were good at their jobs, but they weren't given very good instructions or training about how to do so *effectively*.

The point is there is an entire skill set that should belong to a person conducting a given training, which includes knowing adults' learning styles, and the best way of building this bridge is from *knowing* to *doing*. These styles are called *adult learning principles*, and they are something that trainer and participant alike can familiarize themselves with and learn from each other in a brown bag or other training opportunity.

These principles are the keys that open both the door to success if applied correctly ... and the door to failure if they are ignored. However these skills can be *taught* and *learned*, and that is a very important point to remember. (More on those principles in just a bit, but a little background is necessary first.)

Background: Bored or Engaged?

Ask participants to think back to a recent training session they attended, and honestly ask themselves if they were actually "engaged." Did the activities make them interact with the subject matter being taught? Or did they find themselves listening half-heartedly while multi-tasking on other things at the same time?

Moreover, after the event, were they able to implement the new skills rather quickly? Or, did the new skills dissipate rather quickly? Did the training materials add to what they learned either before, during or after the session or workshop? OR... Are they asking themselves right now, "*What training materials are you talking about?*" (This is certainly not good!)

If the answers to these questions are positive, then the people involved in your trainings are skilled in not only the subject matter, but in the modes of adult learning. This is outstanding news, and you should be pleased with your organization's training efforts.

However, if answers are not positive, then there is some sort of dysfunction going on. Unfortunately, this is all too common. Here's another question: Are the training materials simply a bunch of handouts – or worse yet, a 4-inch thick manual? If that is the case, instructional skills are lacking.

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Too often, a lack of learning is the result. In addition, when any of these poor practices are in place there is usually someone running the training who doesn't understand adult learning principles. But as stated earlier, the good news is that these skills can be *taught* and *learned*. The following are six key points about adult learning principles.

❖ **Adults are *autonomous* and *self-directed*.** They need to be free to direct themselves. Trainers must actively involve participants in the learning process and serve more as facilitators than simply as speakers.



Brown Bagger

Specifically they must get participants' perspectives about what topics to cover and *let them* work on projects that reflect *their* interests. They should allow participants to assume responsibility as *active* learners and not as someone who is merely talked to. Facilitators need to guide participants to *their own* knowledge rather than just supplying them with the bare facts. Finally, participants need to be shown how the presentation, class, or workshop will help them reach personal goals.

EXERCISE: *Discuss with participants a few ways in which they can become more active learners. What specific areas about a given subject matter are they most interested in?*

❖ **Adults have accumulated a wealth of life experiences and knowledge** that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this base of knowledge and experience. To help them do so, trainers should draw on participants' experience and knowledge that is relative to a particular topic. Relate theories and concepts to participants and recognize the value of experience in learning.

EXERCISE: *Ask participants how they might use their experience and knowledge to resolve a minor work-related problem or altercation.*

❖ **Adults are goal-oriented.** Upon enrolling in a course or attending a session, etc., they usually know what they want to learn. Therefore, they appreciate an educational lesson that is organized with clearly defined elements. Trainers must show participants how this class / workshop / session will help them attain their goals. Goals must be set early in the training.

EXERCISE: *Ask participants to write down goals about what they wish to learn from this training.*

❖ **Adults are relevancy-oriented.** They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them. As a result, trainers must identify objectives for participants before the course begins. This also means that any theories or concepts must be related to a setting familiar to participants.

EXERCISE: *Identify and hand out to participants the objectives of the training.*

❖ **Adults are practical.** They like to focus on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge simply for knowledge sake. Trainers must tell participants explicitly how the lesson will be useful to them on the job.

EXERCISE: *Discuss with participants how the course, lesson, etc. will be helpful to them in their day-to-day work. Either trainer and/or participants should give several examples.*

❖ As is the case with all learners, **adults need to be shown respect.** Trainers must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to a class, workshop, etc. Adults should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely in class.

EXERCISE: *Ask participants to bring up any comments or questions they have about the course, workshop, etc. Have them relate what their experiences on the job bring to the training.*



especially any points that might not have been raised by the trainer.

Summary

Establishing adult learning principles in trainings will go a long way toward learning experiences that

are better received, better retained, and a lot more fun for everyone. (**Editor's note:** These principles are illustrated further in the sidebar and the Handout section on page 4.)

Sources: Jim Hopkins, author of *The Training Physical*; Malcolm Knowles and Stephen Lieb, Arizona Department of Health Services, South Mountain Community College.

Overview of Adult Learning Principles

❖ *The reasons most adults enter any learning experience is to create change.* This could encompass a change in (a) their skills, (b) behavior, (c) knowledge level, or (d) even their attitudes.

❖ Compared to school-age children, *the major differences in adult learners are in the degree of motivation, the amount of previous experience, the level of engagement in the learning process, and how the learning is applied.* Each adult brings to the learning experience preconceived thoughts and feelings that will be influenced by each of these factors.

❖ *Assessing the level of these traits and the readiness to learn* should be included each time a teaching experience is undertaken.

❖ *Adults learn best when they are convinced of the need to know the information.* Often a life experience or situation stimulates the motivation to learn.

❖ *The key to using adults' "natural" motivation to learn lies in tapping into their most teachable moments.* For example, a highly stressed employee is likely to be more motivated to learn about relaxation techniques than a co-worker who doesn't feel particularly stressed.

❖ *Adults have a need to be self-directed, deciding for themselves what they want to learn.* They enter into the learning process with a goal in mind and typically assume a leadership role in their learning.

❖ *The challenge for trainers is to be encouraging to participants but also reinforce the process of learning.* Simply talking to an audience is not enough.

❖ *Adults have a greater depth, breadth, and variation in the quality of previous life experiences than younger people.* Past educational or work experiences may taint the participant's perceived ideas about how the training will unfold.

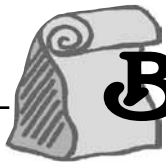
❖ *Former experiences can help the participant connect the current learning experience to something learned in the past.* This may also make the learning experience more meaningful.

❖ *However, past experiences may actually make the task harder if these biases are not recognized as being present by the trainer.* In the case of the highly stressed employee, it may be helpful for the trainer to ask how many participants feel overwhelmed at work, and if they'd had any experiences with relaxation techniques. This would be an opportune time to address any erroneous or preconceived ideas.

❖ *The adult-learning process is facilitated when the following three factors occur:*

- The learner participates completely in the learning process and has control over its nature and direction.
- Learning includes discussion on practical, social, or personal problems.
- Self-evaluation is used as the principle means of assessing progress or success.

Source: "An Overview of Adult Learning Processes", by Sally Russell, MN, CMSRN, CPP. Retrieved from http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/547417_2.



Seven Principles of Adult Learning

1. **Adults must want to learn.** They learn effectively only when they have a strong inner motivation to develop a new skill or acquire a particular type of knowledge.

Obtaining continuing education credit is a strong motivator for adults.

2. **Adults will learn only what they feel they need to learn.** Adults are practical in their approach to learning; they want to know, “How is this going to help me right now?”

Be practical, be direct.

3. **Adults learn by doing.** Children learn by doing, but active participation is more important among adults.

Adults need to be able to use these skills immediately so that they see their relevance.

4. **Adult learning focuses on problems and the problems must be realistic.** Children learn skills sequentially. Adults start with a problem and then work to find a solution.

Begin by identifying what the learner can do, what the learner wants to do and then address the gaps and develop practical activities to teach specific skills.

5. **Experience affects adult learning.** Adults have more experience than children. This can be an asset and a liability.

Use the learners' experience (negative or positive) to build a positive future by making sure that negative experiences are not part of their experience in your program.

6. **Adults learn best in an informal situation.** Children have to follow a curriculum. Often, adults learn only what they feel they need to know.

Involve adults in the learning process. Let them discuss issues and decide on possible solutions. Make the environment relaxed, informal and inviting.

7. **Adults want guidance.** Adults want information that will help them improve their situation. They do not want to be told what to do. They want to choose options based on their individual needs.

Present choices, not instructions.

Source: Canadian Literacy and Learning Network.