

“What's My Motivation?” An Actor's Perspective on Training and Facilitation

By Adam Grupper

It's one of the oldest jokes in the book. A self-important actor, preparing for his next scene, asks his impatient director, “What's my motivation?”

“Your paycheck!” sneers the director.

It's hard to have patience for excessive introspection. We value the bottom line, the view from thirty thousand feet, the perspective at the end of the day. That's all fine. But when it comes to preparing to deliver a training session, cutting out reflection altogether does nothing to enhance your message. If you're in front of your participants and, like that director in the joke, your training fee - or your obligation to train because your job demands it -- is the only motivation that informs what you're doing, you need to rethink things.

While you're building the content of your training session -- amassing data, fine-tuning your learning points, and creating your Power Point deck -- it's easy to lose sight of why, in a fundamental way, you're training in the first place. What are you trying to accomplish? Why is this training session important to you? Why is it important for your participants? Why should your participants listen to you? What are the consequences if your participants *don't* listen to you? You need to consider these questions, or it's likely you'll be leaving the impact of your training session to chance -- *hoping* you'll reach your participants without a clear plan for how that will happen.

When actors prepare to take on roles, they spend a lot of time thinking about what motivates their characters. They think about their characters' objectives or goals, the obstacles that thwart those objectives or goals, and the tactics and strategies they'll employ for achieving them. Hamlet's objective is to seek revenge for his father's murder by his uncle. His excessive deliberation is the obstacle that prevents him from carrying out his revenge. The tactic he employs is to pretend to be insane to throw his enemies off guard and amass incriminating evidence against his uncle. The stakes could not be higher. Hamlet's entire reason for being rests, in his mind, on the fulfillment of his objective.

What are your objectives in your work as a trainer and facilitator? There are obvious core competencies you want your participants to develop based on your training module. So you don't merely want your participants to hear what you have to say. You want them to come away with a deeper understanding of your topic. You want them to have concrete tools at their disposal to effect change and master skills. You want them to be inspired to take action. You want them to walk out of the room thinking and performing in such a way that they can never return to their previous way of thinking and performing.

What are your obstacles? Maybe your participants are experienced and entrenched in their behaviors. Maybe they're inexperienced and under-informed. Maybe they're overwhelmed by their daily job responsibilities. Maybe they're restless because they're preoccupied, or hungry, or bored by previous training sessions during the day. And what about you? Are you nervous? Are you disconnected from your participants? Do you perceive your training topic as dull or, at the other extreme, controversial? Are you feeling uninspired?

What are your tactics to overcome these obstacles and achieve your objectives? You could summon up your enthusiasm and passion for your subject and convey it to your participants. Or ask questions of your participants to get their input and understand their perspective. Or use interactive exercises to keep them engaged. Tell stories, challenge their assumptions, cite examples, make jokes at your own expense. Be open, transparent and available. Demonstrate to your participants that there is no other place you would rather be than right where you are at this very moment – in front of them and with them.

Finally, what are the stakes? “What stakes?” you protest. “I’m training people how to navigate Outlook.” There are always stakes. Think of some. Make some up. Make them as dire and dramatic as you want. Unless our people know Outlook, our company will perish! But if our people know Outlook, our company can take over the world! Sure, it's absurd. But your participants don't need to know what your stakes are and you don't need to behave like a lunatic. The only thing that's important is that stakes bring urgency and energy to your training and facilitation work. Without them, your session must not be very important. And if you don't care about what you're doing, why should your participants?

So keep on amassing your data, fine-tuning your learning points and creating your Power Point decks. The content of your training session is still its backbone. But content isn't everything. It may not even be the most important thing. Hamlet has been around for four hundred years. Its content has remained unchanged in all that time, and its language is among the most exquisite in the canon of English literature. But if you've ever suffered through an Off-Off Awful Broadway production with some pretentious phony in the title role, you'll find yourself squirming in your seat, pining for the brilliance of a Kenneth Branagh or a Laurence Olivier.

Consider, for a moment, The Pledge of Allegiance – content that most of us know by heart. Now imagine it recited by three different people: a bored fifth grader in a school assembly, a foreign dissident who has finally achieved citizenship in the U.S., and the mother of a soldier killed in action. The content is the same; the motivation, the performance -- and the meaning -- entirely different.

So what's your motivation? Here's a hint:

It's not your paycheck.

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