

Comment Appropriately

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- That's interesting
- I agree
- Yes, I've experienced the same thing
- Thank you for that contribution
- Good dialogue!

Where have you heard these lines before? Perhaps in a training class? Perhaps they came out of your own mouth?!

Lately we've noticed many facilitators who respond in ways which sound similar to the quotes above - they may believe that they are responding and encouraging discourse in their training sessions, but in reality their responses lack enough depth or insight to truly facilitate learning.

You may have seen a humorous e-mail circulating, regarding pilots who left notes to their ground-mechanical crews regarding potential safety issues they encountered during their flight. A typical exchange goes like this:

Pilot: funny noise from panel when thrusts engaged

Mechanic: funny indeed

The pilots are truly trying to contribute, but are met with sarcasm and indifference. As a facilitator, you run the same risk when you use these types of phrases; you pacify people by acknowledging their response(s) but run the risk of being perceived as disingenuous. It's funny to look at such an exchange as an observer, but in reality the mechanics would have been more helpful if they had asked questions such as:

- What occurred prior to the noise starting?
- Have you experienced this before?
- What does it sound like (loud, soft, repetitive, sporadic, squeak, thud)?
- What happens after the noise begins?

Why Don't We Know What To Say?

Following an instruction to encourage group discussion, Leader's Guides often say "comment appropriately." When you lead people down a path that fosters dialog it is you, the trainer's, responsibility to make sure the dialog happens. Perhaps the instruction "comment appropriately" is where the dilemma lies – perhaps trainers don't truly understand what "comment appropriately" means.

Here are a few examples of right and wrong responses that might assist you the next time you facilitate a program.

Example 1

Participant: In my last job we would make product upgrades based on customer feedback.

Trainer (inappropriate): That's interesting. Any other comments?

Why is this response inappropriate? The trainer is telling the audience it's interesting, but not WHY it is interesting. The trainer is also missing the opportunity to incorporate the comment into the content of the program, and make it a learning point that others may be able to emulate.

Trainer (appropriate): What was the data collection process and when did it enter the workflow?

Example 2

Participant: I don't think a manager can motivate someone else – motivation is a personal thing.

Trainer (inappropriate): I agree.

Why is this response inappropriate? The trainer's response doesn't address the participant's point. Personal or not, how can we create a situation in which that participant can indeed be motivated by the influence of a manager?

Trainer (appropriate): Let's explore that further – what motivates you as an employee? (Then, re-direct to the entire group: We've heard what motivates Mark – does anyone have a suggestion for how a manager could foster this type of motivation?)

Example 3

Trainer: What types of disasters have you experienced during an online learning class?

Participant: My computer crashed, I couldn't find the tech support number, and I was really frustrated.

Trainer (inappropriate): I've experienced the same thing.

Why is this response inappropriate? The training isn't about the trainer's experiences. We need to know what the "remedy" is and how participants might prevent future "disasters."

Trainer (appropriate): What did you learn from your experience and how might you be able to prevent it in the future?

Example 4

Participant: Customer service is a myth nowadays. People's jobs have been reduced to tasks. They don't raise their heads above the task in order to be able to see the whole customer experience – so how can they possibly be expected to improve it?

Trainer (inappropriate): Thank you for that contribution.

Why is this response inappropriate? This is just an acknowledgement that someone has spoken; the trainer hasn't agreed, disagreed, or offered any food for thought. A participant on the receiving end of such a mundane response might actually be discouraged from offering an opinion again, because he may feel the trainer isn't really listening.

Trainer (appropriate): What do others think?

Example 5

Trainer: How many of you have experienced conflict in the workplace? Let's hear some examples...

Participant(s): *provide examples*

Trainer (inappropriate): Good dialogue!

Why is this response inappropriate? What's 'good' about the dialog? How does it relate back to the content? Is this just a gripe session, or is there a purpose to the discussion?

Trainer (appropriate): Conflict is a natural occurrence in the workplace, sometimes it is interpersonal and sometimes it is caused by the environment. Today we'll explore a resolution process, and try to apply it to the issues you just brought up.

Trainers generally accept that dialog and contributions from participants should be encouraged and welcomed – but that's not the end of the process. In order for true collaboration and learning to take place in the classroom, participant contributions need to be more than heard, they need to be incorporated into the learning process. So the next time you hear yourself saying "thanks for sharing," follow up with a response that generates discussion and deepens the audience's understanding of the content.

That's what 'comment' appropriately REALLY means.