Part - 5

SESSION STARTERS

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Starting Off With
The way in which you begin a session sets the tone for a Bang either a positive or negative learning experience. Unfortunately, the way in which most sessions get started is far from ideal. Following is a familiar scenario:

Your session is due to begin at 8:30 and you are expecting 12 participants. You arrive at the training room 30 - 60 minutes before the session. One participant arrives at 8:20 and another comes in 5 minutes later. At 8:30, there are 5 people in the room including you. You uncomfortably say "let's give them another 5 minutes". At 8:34, three more people stroll in. There still are not enough people in the room for you to do your introduction.

What's wrong with this picture? By waiting around for others to arrive so that you can deliver your introduction, participants pick up on the following messages:

- It's okay to be late.
- I'm not going to miss anything important anyway.
- My learning depends on "pearls of wisdom" from the facilitator.
- This is going to be another boring, passive session with a lot of sitting around.
- This is going to be a waste of time.

Here are some sizzling session starters that get participants active and involved from the word "go".

Your Opening Act
By starting every session with a 10 - 20 minute exercise or activity that can be completed in pairs, trios or small groups, you'll banish the beginning blues forever! The activity you select should be entertaining and highly energetic... fun but not a frivolous "nice to do" that sends the message that nothing of value ever happens at the beginning of your sessions. It should also be directly related to course content. Horror stories and success stories, short case studies, tough questions, card games, and word search puzzles are some superb starters that will add sparkle and sizzle to your sessions.

When the exercise is completed, if all participants have not arrived, give everyone who is present an opportunity to introduce him or herself to the group. Then, give a very brief course overview (5 - 10 minutes) and review the agenda.

1. Horror & Success

Suggested Time Frame: 15 - 20 minutes

Suggested Group Size: Pairs, Trios or groups (maximum size = 4).

Preparation: Prepare several colourful flip charts. Half of them should have the heading "Horror Stories" and the others "Success Stories" with relevant graphics. (Hint: If you cannot draw, use computer-generated clip art. You can print it in colour or run them off in black and white and colour them with scented markers).

Instructions: When the session is scheduled to begin, divide the participants who are present into pairs, trios or small groups. Ask participants to draw on their own experiences and identify horror (or success) stories related to course content. Ask them to write an amusing title for each "story" and 2- 4 short bullet points describing each one. Encourage each participant to identify at least one story. As more participants arrive, explain the exercise and ask them to join groups (pairs or trios) that are already working.

After you have reviewed the course agenda, ask participants to return to their flip charts for another minute or two and write the topic from the course agenda for which each story is relevant. During the course, ask participants to share their success and horror stories as introductions to or examples of specific topics on the course agenda. You can also use these stories during transitions, after breaks and during summaries.

Example: For a supervisory skills programme, ask participants to prepare horror and success stories based on their experiences with former bosses. During the course, you can get participants to share these stories as introductions to or examples of specific supervisory practices to follow or avoid.

2. Short Case Studies

Suggested Time Frame: 15 - 20 minutes

Suggested Group Size: Pairs, Trios or groups
(Maximum size = 4).

Preparation: Prepare one or two case situations (maximum 2 pages) that are directly relevant to course content. Use large font and incorporate graphics. For each case study, prepare 2 - 4 questions that are directly relevant to course content. (Ideally, participants should be asked to read these cases as pre-work. If this is not possible, then place one case per participant on the participant tables.)

Instructions: When the course is scheduled to begin, play quiet music. Give participants 3 - 5 minutes to review the cases and highlight any information that is relevant. Then, form pairs, trios or small groups and ask the groups to record their answers to the case study questions on flip charts. As the other participants arrive, describe the exercise and ask them to join groups (pairs or trios) that are already working.

When the exercise is completed, play lively music and ask participants to circulate and read the other groups' answers. When you review the course agenda, be sure to link the answers to the topics that will be covered during the course.

Example: For a presentation skills course, prepare case studies about individuals who made successful or unsuccessful presentations. Ask participants to identify and record everything that contributed to a poor or an excellent presentation. During the session, if participants are resistant to trying some of the strategies the course is recommending, refer back to the information they generated through the case study. Similar references can also be useful when introducing new topics.

3. Tough Questions

Suggested Time Frame: 10 - 15 minutes

Suggested Group Size: Trios or groups (maximum size = 5).

Preparation: Place oversized, florescent post-it notes or index cards on the participants' tables. Instructions: When the course is scheduled to begin, form groups. Ask each group to identify all of the "tough questions" they want the course to be able to answer by the time the course is finished. Ask participants to write only one question per post-it note or cards. As other participants arrive, explain the exercise and ask them to join groups that are already working.

After you review the course agenda, ask the participants to work in their groups for another minute or two to identify the area of the course to which the question pertains and label their cards. Questions can be debriefed in several ways:

- Before you finish a section of the course, ask participants to look at their cards and ensure that all questions have been answered to their satisfaction. Take time to answer any question that has not been addressed sufficiently.
- Ask participants to identify any questions that have not been answered. The cards with these questions can be exchanged between groups. Answers can be written on the back of each card before the cards are returned to the original group.
- Ask participants to identify any questions that have not been answered to their satisfaction. The cards with these questions can be used for a game show to review course content (example: "Stump the Chump"). If you plan to use this approach, prepare 6 - 10 questions of your own in case all questions have been answered to the satisfaction of the group.

Variety is the spice of life so don't fall into the tedious rut of always using the cards in the same way. Find at least 2 different ways to use the cards.

Example: For sales training, ask participants to identify tough questions about your company's new products, services and policies. Encourage them to focus on difficult questions that customers and potential customers are likely to ask.

4. Card Games

Suggested Time Frame: 10 - 15 minutes

Suggested Group Size: Pairs, (maximum size = 4.)

Preparation: Select a card game such as rummy, crazy eights, or concentration as the overlay for your game. Prepare "playing cards" with information that is directly relevant to course content.

Instructions: When the course is scheduled to begin, play some upbeat instrumental music. Form groups of 2 - 4. Give each group a "deck" of cards and a brightly coloured sheet of paper with instructions. Allow the game to continue until most of the participants have arrived. Review the answers. Award prizes to the winners of each game (or the table with the highest score). If that doesn't encourage participants to show up on time for your next course, nothing will!!

Examples: For a computer course, prepare cards related to function keys or the various menus of the software package that participants will be learning.

For a technical training course you can use the parts and components of the first system that you will be covering as the basis for the game.

5. **Word Search Puzzles**

Suggested Time Frame: 15 - 20 minutes

Suggested Group Size: Pairs or Trios.

Preparation: Prepare questions that are directly relevant to the first agenda item and a word search puzzle containing the answers. Copy the questions and puzzle on a variety of fluorescent sheets of paper.

Instructions: When the course is scheduled to begin, play upbeat music and group participants into pairs or trios. Ask the participants to use the word search puzzle to find answers to the questions. When most of the participants have arrived, review the answers. Award prizes to the pair or trio with the highest number of correct answers.

Example: Word search puzzles can be used for a wide variety of training programmes including orientation sessions, technical training, product or service training, and management training.

Practice Makes Perfect

These are just a few of the sizzling sessions that have been tried and tested by many professional trainers. Experiment and hope they would work for you as well.