

marker



"Marker" is a regular column in Coyote, written by Mark Taylor, looking at issues in training. Feedback from you will be really welcome.

How do we keep up with expectations?

Organising training courses when you do not know the participants beforehand poses a fair number of challenges. Not the least of these is: how do you know what their expectations are and whether they are being met? This is important if we want to create courses which relate directly to our participants.

If the course is open to all, you can ask applicants to put their motivation for attending the course as a question in the application form. Answers will tend to be rephrasing of the publicity you have sent out about the course and will rarely give you any hard information.

At the beginning of a course, there is a mass of more or less unoriginal methods to find out peoples' expectations. One of them irritates the hell out of me and I'm not sure why: it is the one where you give participants a set of coloured post-its (sticky pieces of paper) and ask them to answer questions like "what do I want to take home with me?" "what do I not want to happen?" "what can I share with others?" etc. These papers are then stuck on the wall and everyone has the chance to read them. If the team is serious about asking these questions, then participants should receive a considered reply. Here it is important to divide those

elements which will probably be met by the course, those which are open to negotiation and those over which the team has no control.

Going to a restaurant...

Peoples' expectations during a training course change. This process can be compared to the following scenario. One day, a friend asks you to go out to a new Indian restaurant with a group of people. You have a picture in your head about what an Indian restaurant and its food could be like but, as you have never been there and you do not know the other people, you are not completely at ease when you arrive. After a brief round of introductions, a menu is put into your hands and you choose your first course (it is going to be a long meal) and something to drink. This may involve some advice from and negotiation with the others - will this dish be nice and hot? should we all take this wine? Then you have the chance to take in the surroundings a little - hmm, nice wallpaper, these chairs are a bit hard. Food arrives and after an initial inspection of what is on the plates everybody starts to eat. Did I really order this? Can we have some mineral water without bubbles in it please? Based on your appreciation of what you have eaten already and on discussions with the others, you then make a

choice of what to eat for the second course. Your choice now will be different than if you had made the choice before starting the meal...

Big mouths versus little mouths

Chats during coffee breaks, whispers in plenary, jokes at lunch, discussions late into the night - informal evaluation between participants is going on all the time. There will always be what can, unkindly, be called "big mouths" in a course who will not hesitate to complain or give advice to team members. But what of the "little mouths"? What are they thinking? As has been said somewhere else, the great advantage of having a silent majority is that anyone can claim to speak for it! And here lies a trap for a training team - how much weight should they give to the comments of the "big mouths". My experience is that we tend to spend too much energy on discussing the remarks of the few and that such feedback can cause a lot of unrest and confusion within a team. It becomes too easy for unscrupulous individual team members to push their own (hidden) opinions into team discussions with statements like "I have been talking to participants and they feel that we're spending too much time in working groups" or "The participants think that the workshops should be repeated tomorrow". Certainly, dialogue between team members and participants is important - some of the most vital informal education for both parties takes place during such discussions.

Freeze, Keys, Trees, Rewind, Home, Pow Wow groups

These are just some of the names I have heard of being used to designate continuous evaluation groups during training courses. Such groups have a steady membership consisting of one trainer and a number of participants and they meet usually for around 30/45 minutes at the end of each day. Here is a forum for participants to exchange opinions about the course, challenge themselves and the trainer, give suggestions for change or improvement and, sometimes, help each other make sense of the different intercultural processes they are going through. Here is also a way for the team to get an overview of how all the participants are doing/feeling/evaluating because the trainers can report back to each other when they discuss the day and plan the

next one. The team gets a wider picture, the information can help especially in making those little changes to the programme or the team's approach which can make a big difference. Exchanging views within the "formal" part of the programme can help participants feel more ownership for the course and, if their views are taken into account by the team, they get to see that the team respects them. Sounds great doesn't it?

It is great, but...

and naturally there are some "buts":

- each team member reports only selected highlights of the group's discussions,
- some team members use the increased legitimacy of the group to push their own opinions in their report back,
- some evaluation groups use "their" team member to attack other participants or team members,
- in running their evaluation groups, different team members may have completely different aims from the others, causing confusion amongst participants and frustration for the other team members,
- discussions about these groups can dominate team meetings at the expense of other issues,
- participants often do not get to know the results of their feedback.

It is still great...

- when a team manages to arrive at a real agreement about how to run and report back from Freeze, Keys, Trees, Rewind, Home, Pow Wow groups
- when a team realises that even with such a wonderful method it is not possible to have the whole truth
- when participants can see the results of their feedback.

What's your opinion?

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