by Georges Wagner

TRAINER–PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP

The following article aims to tackle one of the most complicated soft factors in a training course: participant(s)-trainer(s) relationships. How close or distant should trainers be to participants and vice versa? Which kinds of motivation might have an impact on the trainer-participant(s) relationship? At the end we introduce a short questionnaire which could help trainers avoid falling into the "closeness" trap.

"Favouritism" – a never-ending story?

Do you remember your school time when the teacher had his/her favourite pupils or students? Perhaps you can even remember some of your own experiences, looking for ways to get closer to your teacher or trainer, seeking personal advantages or simply trying to "seduce"…

No, this time it's not about love affairs between trainers and participants (for further comments see pp 100-101 of t-kit N°6 about "Training Essentials"), even if many aspects of "favouritism" and other proximity-related problems have similar causes: they include the different roles and responsibilities of trainers and participants and the associated power relationship.

Case study

From the very beginning of a tri-national training course, Moussa, one of the male participants from a Maghreb country often tries to be "near" the male trainer: he usually sits next to him in the plenary session or during meals, wants to carry his bag and addresses him the whole time as "my professor"…

For you as a trainer this behaviour may be pretty strange and you try to keep a certain distance. After a few days you realize that the participant is being teased by other participants from the 2 other countries and being described as "a little bit strange".

During one of the team meetings, you try to develop a strategy to deal with the situation.

a) Who is involved in the dynamics of this potential conflict?
b) What could be the different reasons for the participant's behaviour?
c) What could be different reasons for the teasing behaviour of the other participants?
d) What could the trainer or the team do to improve the situation

At first glance the case presented is perhaps not a typical one but it provides us with a few important points for a more general consideration of similar group interactions:
- There are at least two people involved (at least one trainer and at least one participant).
- The "behaviour" of the participant(s) and the trainer(s) may have an impact on the group dynamics (or, from a systemic standpoint, the group dynamics may have an impact on the participant).
- There can be many reasons for the behaviour of the participant(s) and the trainer(s).
- To develop a proper strategy to deal with the participant(s), it is important to understand the reason(s). Incidentally, in our case study we may have to deal with an intercultural misunderstanding, caused by the participant's different cultural perception of trainer roles (Facilitator vs. teacher). He could create homophobic reactions on the part of the trainer and the other participants may just think he's looking for "Brownie points".

Theme-centred interaction (TCI) and relationship management in a training course

The above example also shows us that proper relationship management during training courses entails a dynamic relationship balance between trainers and participants. The Theme Centred Interaction (TCI) model (See t-kit N°6, pp. 84-86 and Coyote N°7, pp. 31-33) can give us some valuable assistance in understanding the possible dynamics and how to avoid or neutralize them.

For a trainer one of the most important goals in TCI is to help the individual participants become part of the learning group working on a subject which everybody considers to be important. This view also calls for a sensitive balance between the individual participants, the learning group and the course content.

MANAGEMENT AND FAVOURITISM

Favouritism would destroy this balance by not allowing certain individuals to become an equal member of the learning group because of their "special" relationship to the trainer(s). There also is a danger that other participants will react towards this situation, for example by excluding the participant from the group-building process or by no longer respecting the trainer in her/his role as facilitator and as the person responsible for the group process.

On the other hand, participants who are not aware of their own boundaries or who do not respect the trainer's boundaries can also be a major challenge to clear relationship management. This happens more often with participants who know the trainers from other events, perhaps in a different role (e.g. as participant).

The TCI model also gives us some advice on how to improve the situation. One possibility could be to help the participant and the group with relationship building activities to strengthen the group. Another method could be for trainers to make sure that all the participants can see that they are keeping both the participant they know and the rest of the group at an equal distance during the official training activities. If this is not successful because the participant does not respect the trainer's boundaries, you could have a personal talk with the participant explaining to him/her that you have to divide your attention among the whole group.

Why participants and trainers sometimes seek closeness during training courses

The following chart was developed during a brainstorming session at a "Train the trainers course". It looks at some of the reasons why trainers and participants try to have closer relationships.

Some reasons for seeking a closer relationship with the trainer or participant:

Trainer	Participant
Raise one's own self-esteem	Raise one's own self-esteem
Personal loneliness or isolation	Personal loneliness or isolation
Feeling excluded from the team	Excluded from the group
Need for power	Need for power
Sexual or emotional needs	Sexual or emotional needs
Lack of personal attention	Lack of personal attention
Cultural reasons	Cultural reasons
Competition amongst trainers	Competition amongst participants
Manipulation	Obtain personal advantages
Same organisation or former contact	Manipulation
The desire to be always liked by everybody	Same organisation or former contact

It is obvious that a trainer has little influence on some of the participants' motivations. Depending on our willingness to think constantly about our role as a trainer and the power associated with it, we can do more to change our own attitudes: this allows us to develop our personalities by improving our self-awareness.

A professional trainer should be aware of his or her social needs

Now it starts to become interesting: what do we personally need as trainers apart from the wish to be successful and meeting our "training objectives"? Having some idea of our own social needs is part of a professional attitude towards ourselves and our work.
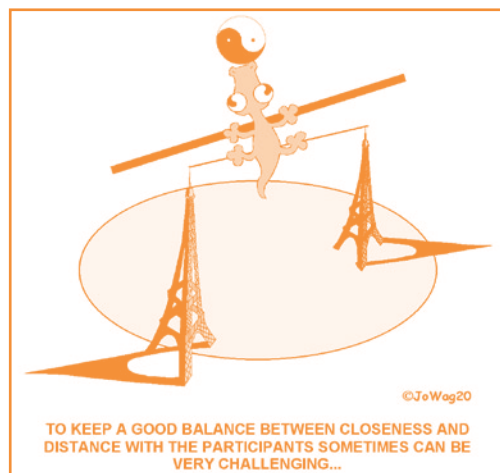
Not only do participants arrive with their personal psychological baggage, including their recent experiences or actual living contexts like their relationship(s), study or work experience. The same is also true for the trainer (team). *Trainers have their own expectations… and personal needs, even during training courses.*

The following questionnaire could give us some ideas as to how we consider our relationships with the participants:

Do I need

- To be friends with everybody?
- To get close to some participants?
- To get close to men in particular?
- To get close to women in particular?
- To get close to certain participants I know already (from other training courses or as former participants or colleagues)?
- Do I feel lonely in the team or in the training course in general?
- Do I need to be respected/loved/worshiped in a very visible way? If yes, what could this mean for your work as a trainer and as a team member?
- Am I attracted by certain participants more than by others?
- Do they remind me of somebody (same appearance, voice, habit or behaviour)?
- The same could be said about people from whom you keep too much distance because you don't like them: what exactly "pushes" them away from me? Who do they remind me of?
- How can I maintain a supportive and growth-inducing closeness-distance balance towards the participants?

It is a fact that it is easier to maintain the right distance if you are a few years older than the participants than if you are of a similar same age to (as often happens in peer group education projects).

TO KEEP A GOOD BALANCE BETWEEN CLOSENESS AND DISTANCE WITH THE PARTICIPANTS SOMETIMES CAN BE VERY CHALLENGING…

For political and/or cultural reasons, some youth organisations also explicitly expect a certain amount of closeness between trainers and participants. Sometimes this demand for equality, sharing of power, ownership of training or at least a flat hierarchy, is misunderstood and can bring unaware trainers into a major role conflict: the boundaries between trainers and participants are no longer clear. This affects trainers' abilities to assume their responsibilities for the training or facilitation process.

On the other hand it's a fact of life that we can't "love" everybody in the same way. However we can respect equally…and give our attention and support to every one.

In conclusion

To be quite clear: we aren't talking here about those trainers who are so cool that they could be a fridge on two legs. We are talking about people who are able to build up an empathic relationship with the participants. This contact and relationship should be well-balanced and include enough closeness to create a trustful working relationship and distant enough to allow the participants the right amount of autonomy for the upcoming learning process And avoid negative impact on the group dynamics level.

Contact :

docwag@gmx.net