Good-Bye Zoom Gloom:
Six Tips for Better Online Training

Victory in the virtual space comes with time, practice, and deliberate attention. Start with these six steps and see what clicks.

By Kate Zabriskie

Years after the world went home and most classrooms moved online, a lot of people still haven't cracked the code to great online teaching and training. Instead of welcoming virtual learning, many see it as a mediocre facsimile of the in-person experience, and they pray for it to go away.

Will those prayers be answered? Yes and no. Many organizations have returned to in-person learning, but a lot of places still favor virtual learning for all or some of their training. The bottom line: Well-rounded training facilitators must have the skills to navigate both environments.

The following tips should help.

Adopt the right mindset.

Just as a cheetah and leopard are both cats but not the same, virtual training and in-person learning are similar but different. To get virtual learning right, stop thinking of it as a poor substitute, and embrace it for what it is – a separate entity with elements that are the same, better, and worse than the in-person environment. You'll have better results if you design your training with online learning

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in mind instead of translating classroom material to the virtual world.

Remember the benefits.

Attention spans are shorter when people go online, so virtual learning works best in short segments of one to two hours. The good news? Truncated learning blocks are easier to schedule. Furthermore, people can engage in learning for 60-120 minutes and then go back to work. Additionally, if the program is longer than a two-hour block, there's time to practice and reflect on what's learned between sessions. Finally, you can record virtual sessions with the click of a button. If a learner steps out or gets called away, catching up after training is easy.

Devote more time to the setup and instructions.

Virtual training facilitators compete with e-mail, texts, instant messaging, and more. So, you don't need a Magic-8 Ball to conclude "Most likely, yes" when asked, "Will people multitask during online training?" They can, they do, and they will. Thus, online learners will miss information they might have heard in the in-person classroom. Accept the idea and accommodate.

Find a way to repeat or emphasize important content and must-hear information. For example, verbally give instructions, and then type or paste those instructions in the chat box.

Let people know what's coming.

"I'm sorry. Could you repeat the question?" No participant wants to say those words, and no training facilitator wants to hear them. Reduce the likelihood of repeat requests by letting people know they'll be on deck before it happens. "John, I'm going to talk through this next idea, and then I'll ask you to share an example." John may not have an example, but one thing is certain, he won't check out and miss what you say.

Establish order.

"We have three hands raised. Let's hear from Mae, followed by Keisha, and then Craig." When you say something like this, you let people know you've seen them and you reduce the possibility that people will talk over each other.

Creating order is also useful when it comes to breakout rooms. When you have groups of more than three people, put someone in charge. "We're going to do some breakout work in just a minute. If your first name comes first in the alphabet, you'll be in charge of your team or you'll assign someone else to be in charge. What in charge means is paying attention to the clock, calling on all members of your group, and choosing a spokesperson. Again, if your first name comes first in the alphabet, you're responsible for managing the discussion or assigning someone from your group to do so."

Cricket proof your interactions.

"Are there any questions?" Chirp. Just crickets and nothing else. When people don't step forward, a certain awkwardness can fill the virtual room. The solution? Avoid the problem by providing an escape hatch. For example, "I'm going to pause for questions if you have them. If you do have a question, raise your virtual hand. If you don't and you're ready to move on, type the word 'good' in the chat." With those instructions, one of two things will occur. Either you'll get questions or a parade of "good" in the chat. Either way, you'll avoid the sound of silence. §

Leading, Training, & Living in a Virtual World

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