

MOSAICA

The Center for Nonprofit Development
and Pluralism

CORPORATION

FOR NATIONAL

★ SERVICE

TrainingBriefs

Dealing with Difficult Training Situations

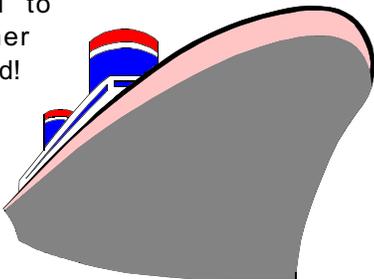
*In *TrainingBriefs*, MOSAICA uses the term *member* to refer to individuals (including members, volunteers, and participants) providing service in National Service programs.

National Service program staff, site supervisors, and trainers share responsibility for member training and development. *TrainingBriefs* provide these individuals with useful information and innovative ideas for training and development.

TrainingBriefs are produced bi-monthly by MOSAICA under Cooperative Agreement #98CADC0009 with the Corporation for National Service. This *TrainingBrief* (#13) was written by Dan Balón and designed by LaTosha Joseph. This material represents the opinion of MOSAICA, and does not necessarily represent official Corporation policy.

To begin or stop receiving MOSAICA's *TrainingBriefs* by fax, or find out about training and other available assistance, contact: Phon Malaikham, Project Assistant <phon@mosaica.org>, or Dan Balón, Project Coordinator <dan@mosaica.org>, MOSAICA, 1000 16th Street, NW, Suite 604, Washington, DC, 20036, e-mail <dan@mosaica.org>, website <<http://www.mosaica.org/natl.htm>>, telephone (202) 887-0620, fax (202) 887-0812.

MOSAICA welcomes Phon Malaikham, Project Assistant, our newest team member, to the National Service Training & Development Project. We are excited to have her on board!



Successful training involves more than designing an agenda, developing activities, sharing information, and providing for active learning. Even the most interesting content and effectively designed experiential learning activities are not immune to challenging training situations. They occur in almost all training sessions in various forms, but they are also manageable! (For information about experiential learning, see *Starting Strong*, pp. 85–86.)

Training challenges originate from many sources — for example, dealing with the “dominant” member, who overwhelms the participant group in discussions and activities. Another typical challenge is maintaining the interest of a group of learners with different levels of expertise. Each situation requires its own solution.

Below are some ideas for addressing challenging training situations that result from participant behavior.

Address the behavior — not the person — when handling a challenge from one or few individual(s). To avoid personalizing the situation, mentally separate individuals from the behaviors they exhibit. It is the way the ideas are expressed — not the person — that disturbs the session. For example, confront “asking too many questions not related to the topic” by asking that questions be limited to topics directly related to the session, rather

than criticizing the person asking them — any trainer behavior that is seen as unkind to an individual member can negatively affect the whole learning environment, making all members uncomfortable and discouraging participation. Consider the consequences of confronting a behavior publicly versus privately. For example, with an excitable member providing an excessive number of responses during a brainstorming session, a private conversation during the next break may be most effective.

Be flexible in your training design to address unexpected questions.

For example, if participants want to address a problem or an issue not included in the agenda that is relevant to the topic, be prepared to shift gears and respond. Rearrange your agenda if the issue needs attention; build time into the agenda for unexpected group discussion. Create a symbolic “parking lot” (e.g., a sheet of newsprint in the corner of the room or an open paper bag on each table) that allows participants to pose questions that may not be within the scope of the training topic; be sure to set aside planned time to address those questions later in the session.

Find ways to rechannel energies of participants who dominate the group. For example, you may have a member who talks too much, thus preventing others from participating in discussions. To limit domination of a small group, implement cooperative learning activities with rotating roles — e.g., facilitator, recorder, reporter,



observer, timekeeper — that promote teamwork and build member skills in working in groups. Encourage dominating members to assume non-speaking roles (see *Starting Strong*, pp. 197–202). In large group settings, ask members how they want to be acknowledged when speaking in the group — for instance, use a fun object (e.g., stress ball) that identifies the participant who has “the floor.”

Use diverse training techniques to engage participants who have different levels of experience and expertise.

While diversity can be interesting, meeting the needs of all members can be difficult — more experienced participants may become bored, less experienced individuals need more time to understand training content, etc. Use diverse small groups that enable members with specific knowledge to teach others within the group; also try grouping members by levels of experience and knowledge and give more experienced groups appropriately challenging assignments (see “Big Results from Small Groups,” *TrainingBrief #3*: October 1997).

Use ground rules where participants have inter-group conflicts.

Engage participants at the start of the session to brainstorm a list of both training session expectations — **what** members want to learn from the session (e.g., “new tutoring activities that are fun and creative”) — and ground rules — **how** members plan to interact with each other (e.g., “raise both hands when someone shares information way off the topic”). Be sure to agree on a list of ground rules if you expect or are aware of inter-group conflict; bring a sample set of rules with you to the training. Post the expectations and ground rules; suggest that members

review the lists periodically; and be prepared to invoke the ground rules. If a difficult situation arises and you have no agreed-upon ground rules, depart from the agenda and ask members how they would resolve the problem. Use the situation as a training opportunity for your members — a chance to gain some experience and skills with group dynamics.

Maintain a positive attitude. Do not fall into a common trap of channeling too much energy into the challenges posed by only one or two members. Deal with issues as they come; but, for the sake of the other session participants, respond quickly and move on. Your attitude counts. Remember that all participants — especially those not involved in the situation — will react not only to the situation itself but also to how you respond. Stay focused on the training topic and expectations established by all members. Monitor your own training style, be attentive to the needs of diverse learners, and keep a positive attitude! (For more information on trainer style, see “Strengthen Sessions with Style,” *TrainingBrief #5*: December 1997.)

Follow up with your members after the training session.

Once you have handled a difficult training situation effectively, your involvement does not stop there. Individual member behaviors during a training session (e.g., chatty members, attention-seeking questioners, unusually quiet extroverts) are often symptomatic of larger member development issues that require appropriate attention and supervision. They may also reflect group development concerns (e.g., underlying group tensions, second-year member turf issues) that may best be handled individually or in a group meeting after the training session.

ACTIVITY: I Like Someone Who...

This activity has been a favorite activity during MOSAICA training seminars across the country. Use I Like Someone Who after a break to energize the group or early in a training session to break the ice (or improve participants' mood if you are dealing with a difficult training situation). Because this is a physical activity, be aware of any participant disability issues.

Purposes:

To give members an opportunity to become familiar with each other's interests and experiences. To encourage team building among members in a training session. To energize members through an undemanding physical activity.

Group size considerations:

If the space is available, this is an ideal activity for especially large groups (over 25 participants), but it can easily accommodate a moderately-sized group (between 10–25 participants) as well.

Instructions:

Have participants sit down in chairs that form a circle, while you begin the activity by standing in the middle. As facilitator, begin by introducing an “I Like Someone Who...” statement that draws connections among participants — based on preferences, interests, or experiences. Some examples include: “I Like Someone Who...is a night person,” “I Like Someone Who...likes sushi” or “I Like Someone Who...has seen the film *Life is Beautiful*.”

Direct all participants who can relate to the statement to move from their spaces and find new seats somewhere in the circle; those who cannot relate to the statement should remain in their places. The only rule is that participants cannot take a new position that is directly to the left or right of their current seat. As participants are scrambling for new seats, you also will search for a seat, thus leaving one person without a place. This participant then becomes the person in the middle and provides another “I Like Someone Who...” statement.

