

## Getting More for Your Training Buck!

Safety training is a fact of life for employers. It must be done for a couple of reasons; it's mandated by OSHA and more importantly, it's simply the right thing to do. Since it must be done, employers might as well do it well and in a way that best benefits their employees. One way to do this is to realize that when training your employees you are dealing with adult learners. This fact is a "no brainer" but can be very important when putting together a company's education program.

There are obvious differences between adult learners and children; first, adults come with a host of knowledge and experiences built in. This can be an effective "hook" to catch the adult learner. By including them in the teaching process as resources for real life examples, the adult learner will feel more invested in the training. Another difference is that the adult learner is just that; an adult and deserves to be treated like one. Techniques used to have children cooperate and pay attention may be very insulting to an adult learner.

To help improve the efficacy of your education programs it can be helpful to become familiar with Malcolm Knowles and his Five Principles for Teaching Adults. Knowles is observed five common trends among adult learners.

1. Make Sure Your Adult Students Understand "Why". When children ask why they have to learn or do something the teacher's response of "because I said so" is usually enough. This will not work with adult learners. Your "students" may have to attend a training session but they don't have to take part or take anything away from it. By gearing the material to explain how the employee will benefit (the "why"), the training experience will be much more rewarding for everyone.
2. Realize and Respect the Students' Different Learning Styles. There are three accepted learning styles-

Visual- These learners rely on pictures, graphs and diagrams. The best way to present material is to provide handouts, doing a demonstration or using a "white board".

Auditory- learn best by hearing the information presented. They get a lot out of participating in discussions about the topic at hand.

Kinesthetic- This group is best described as "hands-on learners". By trying out the information as they learn it, retention comes more easily.

No training session will be filled with only one learning style, but a jumble of all three. Using a bit of all three styles in a presentation will better engage all learners.

3. Allow Your Students to Experience What They're Learning. Experience isn't meant to be only hands-on, it can take many forms. Any activity that gets the students involved in the learning process is considered to be experiential. It can take the form of discussions, demonstrations, and even role playing.

Another layer to this principle is to honor and include the life experiences and insight the adult learner brings to the table. In safety training, it can be helpful to have class members share their experiences of near-misses or accidents. This helps to show those with less experience that jobsite-related injuries and fatalities are real and not just a type of training session scare tactic.

4. You Can Lead a Horse to Water. Applied to training, this simply means that if a student isn't ready to (or interested in) learning it really doesn't much matter what the teacher does or doesn't do. This is where those teaching adult learners have to be flexible. Situations will arise that lend themselves to teaching a topic at a time that may not be on the schedule, perhaps an off-topic question is asked. If addressed then and there, you've monopolized on the students' interest. If you wait for it to show up on the schedule you may have lost their interest.
5. Encourage the Adult Learner. Many of the folks in a training session may not have been in an educational setting for quite some time. This can be intimidating for them. When time out of school, the intimidation factor and older brains are combined, answers may come a bit slowly. This is why those teaching adults need a good amount of patience. It often takes a lot of courage to participate in a class. Even small contributions should be encouraged. But remember - you're dealing with adults. They'll be able to see through "false" encouragement. This can potentially do more harm than no encouragement at all. Always remember that a little goes a long way.

Teaching adults does have its challenges. But, by working to the students' many strengths, these challenges can be minimized. Being aware of some of the things that make adult learners tick can make any training session be more effective and pleasurable for everyone.

*For additional help with safety and OSHA compliance, take advantage of the resources available through NCMA. These resources include the NCMA Block Plant Safety Software. The software is available from NCMA at (703) 713-1900 at a cost of \$150 for up to 3 plants/year (nonmember \$450).*