

Published in *Professional Development Quarterly*, February 2001.

TRAINING LAWYERS: The Toughest Audience

By Susan G. Manch

I had my very first teaching experience as a graduate student at the University of Virginia. One of my favorite professors told me to prepare thoroughly because college students would be the toughest audience I would ever face.

Though he was right at the time, later experiences proved him to be wrong. Daunted as I was by that lecture hall full of senior psychology majors, the years I have spent developing and presenting training seminars on attorney management skills for lawyers have led me to believe that *lawyers* are actually the toughest audience of all. This will come as no surprise to those among you who are responsible for professional development planning. Yet, I have come to appreciate that the nature of the lawyer audience has forced me to become a much better trainer.

In academia, budding professors are taught that more information is better--more theory, more research, more supporting evidence, more anecdotal incidents, and so forth. There is a tendency to rely on getting the point across through sheer repetition of similar and related information. There is also an expectation that an audience will sit still and listen to all this because of their overwhelming interest in the topic. When I first started designing training programs on attorney management issues, I applied that same academic approach, poring over research and developing extensive curricular outlines.

Luckily, I learned very quickly (read: before any firm fired me) that most lawyers will not sit through long, theoretical lectures. They want information to be distilled to its essence and communicated in compact units. They are quick studies--grasping essential issues immediately and demanding that the presenter move beyond the obvious. They require that the information presented be both meaningful and applicable, and they expect the trainer to fully understand the legal environment. In short, they are a challenging audience—but they are also a rewarding one.

Working closely with clients over the years, I have learned some essential lessons about the lawyer audience that I am happy to share.

Lesson 1: Time is money

Everyone is too busy, but when it comes to lawyers the use of time has concrete, measurable impact. Most lawyer audiences will not sit through long training seminars, no matter how scintillating the content. They simply do not have the time. If I suggest two hours, they will ask if it can be done in one. If I suggest a half-day workshop, they will try to fit it into one and one-half hours, over lunch. I am forever compressing, deleting, and generally shortening. It might be different if I specialized in training on legal issues, but my focus is on helping senior lawyers develop the skills necessary for the effective management of the junior lawyers. Most lawyers characterize this as “soft skills” training and afford it less time than they would substantive legal seminars. The challenge is to make the very best use of the time available.

Yet, for all the compression and deletion, the content is almost always improved by the process. Imagining the audience I will face forces me to refine my content to its essential points. Axing time that would have been spent describing the issues or explaining the philosophy behind the management strategies and applying it to a more in-depth description of hands-on strategies that will really work presents a far greater intellectual challenge for the presenter. It forces the trainer to know the material well enough to be able to discuss its practical application from every angle. The bar is set high, but the content inevitably benefits from this additional challenge to the presenter.

Lesson 2: Make it meaningful and practical

Perhaps because it is so often poorly done, so-called “soft skills” training is not high on lawyers’ training wish lists. Though many recognize they need help developing people and team management skills, learning to give effective feedback and evaluations, and creating effective mentoring relationships with junior associates, they have to be convinced that the trainer truly offers a practical route to the attainment of those skills. Corporate trainers who believe their content will transfer seamlessly to the legal environment or presenters who underestimate the intellectual capacity of the legal audience make serious errors in judgment. Lawyers can be engaged in training on management and communication skills, but the content must be meaningful in their environment. They demand content that is low on theory and issues, and high on realistic solutions and practical recommendations.

How many times have you sat through a professional presentation only to leave thinking, *“I know that’s the problem, but what can we do about it?”* Too often, presenters are tempted to state and restate the problem and never get around to the hard part—talking about solutions. The best reward for trainers working with lawyers is that the nature of the audience forces them to take every idea presented to the next level. It is not enough to define the problem. Lawyers will grasp the problem in a few sentences. What they want from the “expert” is what to *do* about the problem. This is a challenge for many presenters, the majority of whom are steeped in the professional trainer’s tradition of stating and restating the problem, expecting the audience to come to its own conclusions on solutions. The paradigm shift creates a challenge for the presenter, but it is one that allows her to take her thinking to the next level of complexity. Crafting practical solutions that will actually be implemented is the most rewarding aspect of this process.

Lesson 3: Help them separate the “shoulds” from the “musts”

Once you have begun to develop strategies to present, the challenge is to winnow them down to only those strategies that make sense for that specific audience. In my experience, it is counterintuitive to present long lists of the ideal behaviors that define competent managers. The audience will be overwhelmed and dispirited. Most have neither the time nor the inclination to be textbook managers. Under the best conditions, they are looking for realistic ways to help themselves and those who work with them find greater satisfaction in their day-to-day practice. Under the worst conditions, they are urgently seeking the means to stem a painful tide of attrition and dissatisfaction in their workplace. The trainer’s challenge is to help either group sort out the “musts” from the “shoulds.” In a perfect world, everyone would follow the “should” list, but in the real world of billable hours and demanding clients, it is only prudent to identify the skills and tasks that are critical.

The reward for completing this sifting exercise is that the program developer is forced to fully examine the ways in which the skills being taught would actually be applied in the real legal work world. Too often, professional presenters are tempted to present long lists of classic management strategies that they say are sure to improve anyone’s workplace satisfaction, but that rely on a model developed to serve the corporate management structure. This creates only confusion for lawyers functioning in the horizontal management structure of a law firm. The central task is to determine what matters to the associates being managed. Trainers are presented with the dual challenges of assessing associate needs and identifying management practices that will meet those needs. This requires gathering insight from those being managed and shaping management strategies to fit a unique culture or specialized practice. The trainer has to understand the issues inside and out. You cannot use “cookie cutter” solutions and strategies with this audience and survive, because every legal workplace situation is different. The trainer’s reward is being given license to approach each program with fresh perspective, knowing in advance that no one solution will always be right.

The challenges presented by the lawyer audience are commensurate with the rewards experienced by those who are fortunate enough to work with them. Specializing in training for lawyers has made me a much better trainer. It has challenged me to refine content to the core of an issue. It has helped me shift my focus from defining problems to crafting solutions. And finally, it has allowed me to apply creativity in every program I present. I will not stop wishing I could have just a little more time for each presentation (I promise I would use it wisely!), but I continue to be thankful for the opportunity to work with intelligent and challenging audiences.

My old professor wasn't wrong about college students—they were indeed a tough audience. But I guess he never worked with lawyers.

Susan G. Manch is a principal in the legal management consulting firm of Shannon & Manch in Washington, D.C. Her firm specializes in professional development programming for lawyers, including programs on interviewing skills, giving effective evaluations, and developing mentoring relationships. She can be reached at (202) 293-8900 or via e-mail at shannmanch@aol.com.