

# Talking Head Meets Walking Dead

***Using Coaching Principles to Make Training Hands-on, Fun and Effective***

*By Tony Stoltzfus*

It's 1:45 in the afternoon and I am ready to pass out. Lunch has settled in my stomach, the teacher is plowing through the fourth hour of the seminar, and my love of learning is fighting a losing battle against my drooping eyelids. If I have to sit here in passive receiving mode much longer, no ingrained social convention will be able to restrain me from lying down on the carpet and taking a nap.

At one point or another, we've probably all been victims of the talking head syndrome—the philosophy that says the best way to learn is to have someone talk at us for hours on end—and ended up walking away from the event more brain dead than fed. The ineffectiveness of lecture-style learning is well documented. For instance, retention rates for lecture are only one quarter of those for multi-media presentations, *one tenth* of those for discussion, and *one-fifteenth* that of hands-on practice. So why in our churches are we so dependent on a teaching format for spiritual- and leadership growth?

Coaching can point us to a better way. Coaching is based on adult learning principles that leverage how people learn best. For instance, adult learning theory (and coaching) say that people learn the most when they are actively involved, not just passive listeners. Coaching shows us that high buy-in is usually more important to change than someone else's great ideas, that honesty and transparency produce deeper change, and that telling is not a very effective way to produce growth. Applying principles like these to the way we teach and train can make us more effective—and less likely to reduce our audience to a vegetative state! Here are some ways to do it.

## **1. Use Multiple Learning Methods**

Instead of employing just teaching, or only discussion, combine several learning methods on the same material. I like to deploy a model I call "Tell>Show>Discuss>Do". First, I lead with a brief input segment that describes what we will be learning (Tell). Then I demonstrate the skill with an audience member (Show). Before the demo, I tell the rest of the group to watch for certain key things in the demo, which sets us up for a debriefing



where the principles in the demo are experientially discovered by the learners (Discuss). This forces everyone to be an active participant in the learning instead of a passive listener. They are motivated to stay involved because I have them practice on each other during the last half of the session (Do).

## **2. Interaction Yields Retention**

The learning methods that produce the highest retention—discussion, practice, and teaching the material to others—are highly interactive, while the ones that put us in a passive, receiving mode (lecture, reading) are least interactive. Most churches fill training times with lengthy teachings, followed by minimal discussion and usually no practice. Those sessions could literally be five or ten times more effective if the teacher's prep time went into designing interactive learning experiences instead of planning what to tell everyone.

## **3. Be Learner-Centered, Not Teacher-Centered**

I like to limit input to 10% to 20% of total training time, and use it to set the table for the guts of the session (the interactive learning) instead of building the session around a teaching. The focus should be on how **the learners** can learn best, not on what **I** want to teach. I see three main reasons for our overdependence on teaching in ministry circles: 1) It is familiar—it's the way we've always seen it done; 2) It is less work for us to prepare a teaching than a quality interactive experience (at least until we get used to planning them); and 3) Ego—it feels *so* good to deliver the word of the Lord to a big group and get the kudos the focus on your up-front skills brings.

So we overuse teaching because it's familiar to us, less work for us, and strokes our ego--who is that approach centered on? The teacher. That's the exact opposite of the client-centered value that's at the heart of coaching!

## **4. Practice, Practice, Practice**

Too often we forget the vital role self-confidence has in implementing what we've trained people to do. Without a chance to practice actually doing the thing, most people feel incapable or uneasy about it, and therefore will never try to do it. And without walking with someone while they implement a new skill, most learners will revert back to their tried and true old way of doing it. One large study showed that 90% of those who were taught new skills but lacked practice and follow through never changed! Skills training without ample practice with feedback will almost certainly fail.

## **5. Leverage Life Experience**

One important quality of adult learners is that they bring a lot of insight from their life experience to the table. In fact, adults learn best when they learn from each other. Your training should leverage that principle. Discussion and discovery learning with role plays (where the trainees see an interaction and draw insights from what they saw, instead of

being told what to think) allow them to do just that. Another level of life experience you can tap is to have trainees practice the skill using real life issues. When we practice ministry skills on real needs, people get real breakthroughs!

There are challenges to implementing experiential learning. In a teaching, you can script every moment, while with interactive learning, you have to be flexible and respond to what people want to know. Not only do you lose some control over what happens, you have to have a higher level of competency in the discipline, because people might ask about anything! You can *teach* things you aren't living, but it's almost impossible to *train* them. Training is asking people to do what you do--and if you do it wrong, so will they.

But there are big advantages to going this route. For the learner, high buy-in, a focus on retention, and being learner-centered increase the impact of the training. But just as important is what it does for you, the teacher/trainer. Interactive training forces you to stop doing what you want and start responding to others' needs and desires. And that's the kind of thing that really forms Christ within us.

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