

# Dealing with Jerks

## A Training 101 Article

Published in *Training and Development Magazine*  
October 1998 Issue

---

By Dick Grote

## INTRODUCTION

---

There's a new "Challenger Disaster" that we as trainers too often have to contend with. But this challenger disaster has nothing to do with NASA space shuttles. It's the disaster we confront when confronted with a classroom challenger whose choice of behavior is disruptive or obnoxious.

I still remember vividly my very first day as an instructor in front of a class. What made my maiden training voyage so memorable was the unforgettably obnoxious behavior of the jerk who occupied one of the fifteen seats around a U-shaped table where I was delivering the first day of a rigorous five-day program on rational problem-solving and decision-making.

I was unable to speak one declarative sentence without this guy's piping up to prove me wrong. Whatever I said, he had a better way. Every tip, trick and technique I had learned in the intensive two-week train-the-trainer program I had just completed proved worthless with this creep. And worst of all was that in the back of the room silently sat Lorne, the vendor's master instructor, determining whether I was qualified to be certified to teach their program.

As soon as the session ended, Lorne yanked me into an empty office, slammed the door and howled at me, "What is the matter with you? Can't you see the reactions of all the other participants . . . how angry they are with this guy? Every one of them wants to rip him apart! *Why* are you trying to handle him all by yourself!"

I was struck by a BFO — a blinding flash of the obvious. The next morning I walked confidently into the classroom, began my presentation, and waited for Mr. Odious to open his mouth. He promptly did. Instantly I turned to a participant across the way and blandly asked, "What do you think of George's contribution, Harry?"

I was home free. Before Harry could finish, two other participants were jumping in, eager to rip this guy a new one. When another attempt or two on his part generated another cascade of collegial denunciation he retreated, defeated. From then on he paid quiet attention, and may even have ended the program learning more than he expected about how some people solve problems.

## DEALING WITH JERKS

---

That first training session taught me a useful rule about dealing with people whose goal is more irritation than information: The other participants are almost always on your side. They find his

behavior just as maddening as you do, but lack the authority to confront an obnoxious colleague directly. So as soon as a classroom participant crosses the obvious line between honest intellectual challenge and rude provocation, turn to the rest for support. You'll find them solidly in your corner.

I was reminded of Lorne's wise advice about how to neutralize Mr. Odious and all of his surly cousins during a recent series of train-the-trainer programs I conducted for a large federal intelligence agency. The trainers were learning how to conduct a one-day program to introduce their agency's new performance management system. They all had the normal worries about learning the formal mechanics of the system and the techniques for presenting it. What did disturb them greatly were their anxieties about how they would handle the hostility they anticipated in their role as messengers that their agency was instituting a new program that would hold people accountable for their performance and insist that it be regularly and honestly assessed. They were prepared for the tough questions and skeptical arguments that as a trainer go with the territory. But they were apprehensive about how to deal confidently and professionally with the possibility of rudeness, refusal to participate, immature deportment and flatly unacceptable classroom behaviors.

The tools and techniques we identified worked for them. They will be useful to any trainer, neophyte or expert, when people choose to act in unsuitable ways. No promises or guarantees, but here's what other trainers have used to head off "challenger disasters."

## SETTING THE STAGE

---

The first step — a crucial one in preventing potential troublemakers from even beginning their disruptions — is to "set the stage" by making your expectations about appropriate classroom behavior clear from the start. Sometimes people behave inappropriately in a training session simply because they have no experience in playing the role of "participant." Help them and yourself by giving them a job description.

One direct way to do that is simply by telling people precisely what your expectations are. A pre-prepared flipchart or overhead transparency entitled, "How to Get the Most out of Today's Session," can communicate expected group norms and appropriate behaviors without suggesting that you are telling a bunch of unruly children how they are supposed to behave. If time allows, a short team exercise where participants identify, "Characteristics of a Successful Workshop Participant" can not only establish group norms but familiarize people with the basic mechanics of working in team settings during training programs.

Another workable stage-setting procedure when you're introducing possibly unpopular policies is to make clear in the beginning that the course content is not merely a suggestion or a good idea. It is, in fact, a *decision* on your organization's part that has been considered, discussed and settled. Make clear that the purpose of today's session is to help people in the company learn to use a new tool; it is not to debate whether or not this tool should be adopted. Allow people to be skeptical of whether the tool will work, but explain that the time for pondering whether we should adopt this approach has passed.

## THE VALUE OF SKEPTICS

---

One veteran trainer provided a terrific metaphor he uses to explain the appropriateness of skepticism. "We all come to training programs carrying two suitcases," he explains to every new group. "One of them is labeled SKEPTIC; the other is labeled CYNIC.

"I'd like each of you to leave the suitcase labeled CYNIC outside the door, but feel free to bring in the one labeled SKEPTIC. Put it right up on the table next to you; rummage in it anytime you want throughout the day. And when you leave here tonight after the session, you can pick up your CYNIC suitcase . . . if you still want it. Otherwise just leave it there, and we'll arrange to have it thrown out with the trash."

Maybe if we give people permission to embrace their skepticism, they'll be able to abandon their cynicism.

## DEALING WITH GENUINE JERKS

---

Explaining your expectations and setting group norms will certainly reduce the likelihood of unacceptable behaviors. But what should the trainer's response be when, regardless of stage-setting, we're forced to deal with a boisterous sniveler or obvious adversary? These are the techniques that will work when you have to deal with particularly difficult participants. I'll start with the mildest, and move toward some of the more direct forms of confrontation:

## MAKE HER THE TEAM LEADER

---

Like many trainers, I've found that assigning people into small groups and frequently rotating the leadership of these mini-teams works wonders both in enhancing learning and increasing participants' enjoyment of the training experience. Consider the fact that people may be disruptive in class less out of malice or hostility, but just because they crave some attention. Try to identify some characteristic of the individual that will provide a reasonable assurance that

your problem child will become the next team leader. Then, for example, announce: "Your team leader for the next activity is the person wearing the most red . . . with the largest wristwatch . . . with the longest hair."

## USE GOLD STARS

---

I won't conduct a training program without being armed with a yellow highlighter. When a participant answers a difficult question correctly or makes a particularly insightful statement, I grab her name tent, whip out my marker, and award a "gold star." Silly? Of course. But all of us are stroke-deprived and a goofy gold star can be a significant form of recognition. If you do use gold stars or any similar reinforcement technique during your presentations, make a special effort to allow your problem child to earn a star. It's unquestionably manipulative and incredibly productive.

## NON-VERBALS

---

There are many non-verbal signals we can use to communicate to a participant that his behavior is problematical. Forget physical violence. While tempting, it creates more serious problems. A better approach involves simply ignoring the person. Just pay no attention to Sally whatsoever, and make it obvious that you are in fact consciously ignoring both her and her obnoxious "contributions."

Another non-verbal technique is the *glare* or *dirty look*. But rarely (as most parents have painfully discovered) does this approach work. Usually, it generates more misbehavior than it remedies. Here's a different non-verbal tactic. Look directly at the person, slowly shaking your head back and forth, the befuddled expression on your face conveying your bewilderment: "Are you actually making those asinine words come out of your mouth? Are you really uttering those incredibly witless statements?" Your expression should be less one of anger and hostility than one of pity, forgiveness and simple head shaking, stupefied commiseration.

## FORCE SPECIFICS

---

This is a useful and professionally dignified approach when the individual is making sweepingly ignorant statements: "This will never work! This system is nonsense! This is all just a pile of hooey!"

Asking the participant direct questions can be helpful in turning generalized condemnations and angry indictments into rational expressions of genuine concern. For example, ask, "What in

particular do you feel will not work well, Sally?" Or, "Just which part of the approach do you feel is hooley, Louis? And just what is hooley, anyway?"

### **"THANK YOU FOR SHARING THAT . . ."**

---

There's no law that requires you to respond to every primitive or dull-witted statement a participant makes. Simply acknowledge the fact that his mouth moved by saying, "Thank you for sharing that . . ." and then continue with your agenda.

### **A PRIVATE CONVERSATION**

---

This is the most serious step before you decide that the session simply cannot continue. Call a break and immediately say, "Paul, I need to talk with you for a moment." When the room has cleared and it's just you and Paul, say these exact words: "Paul. *[pause]* Is it personal?"

This direct and unexpected statement will catch the person off-guard. It will also generate an immediate denial of any personal animus. Now that you have the advantage, explain the facts of the matter bluntly: Paul's choice of behavior is unacceptable. If he decides to continue with it, that decision on his part will cause you to make a decision: Either to call his boss or the program administrator and have him removed from the room; or to cancel the program entirely. End the conversation by making sure he knows that the outcome will be entirely his choice.

### **A FINAL, PERSONAL WORD**

---

Quite frankly, I believe that we as trainers allow ourselves to take too much crap from training program participants. For some reason, either because we see ourselves as skilled and caring professionals, or because we feel that we ought to have sufficient skills to be able to handle *anything* that comes up in the classroom, we tolerate behavior there that we would never accept if it occurred in our own offices.

Don't feel that you are required to put up with an abusive, disparaging, contemptuous participant. You have earned the right to require every person in that room to behave as a mature and responsible adult. If after a few subtle or direct chidings someone still chooses to behave inappropriately, I urge you to say, "George, your behavior is unacceptable. If you are unable to act in a mature and reasonable manner, I will stop teaching this workshop and leave. The participants will then be scheduled for another class without your presence."

And if the behavior continues, walk.

#### ABOUT DICK GROTE

Dick Grote is Chairman and CEO of Grote Consulting Corporation in Dallas, Texas, and the developer of the GroteApproach<sup>SM</sup> web-based performance management system. He's the author of *The Complete Guide to Performance Appraisal*, *The Performance Appraisal Question and Answer Book* and *Discipline Without Punishment*. Dick's latest book, *Forced Ranking: Making Performance Management Work*, was published in 2005 by the Harvard Business School Press.

#### ABOUT GROTEAPPROACH, LTD.

GroteApproach, Ltd., is dedicated to delivering the technology, services and client care that transform organizations from best-effort climates into results-driven cultures. The GroteApproach web-based performance management system is the culmination of Dick Grote's mission to transform the way organizations manage and develop their most valuable resource - their people. It reflects best practices in strategy-based performance management as identified in Dick's 25 years of research and consulting with hundreds of sophisticated organizations throughout the world. Its combination of unrivaled expertise and superior technology make the GroteApproach system an ideal fit for organizations large and small.

#### ABOUT GROTE CONSULTING CORPORATION

Grote Consulting Corporation is one of America's best-known and most respected specialized management consulting firms. Headquartered in Dallas, Texas, Grote Consulting helps sophisticated organizations, large and small, implement best-practice performance management systems. Its clients include some of the most prestigious organizations, public and private, in North America, Western Europe, and Southeast Asia.

---

**Copyright © 1998 Dick Grote. All rights reserved. Reproduction is prohibited.**

15303 DALLAS PARKWAY, SUITE 645 ADDISON, TEXAS 75001

800.734.5475    [www.GroteApproach.com](http://www.GroteApproach.com)    [www.GroteConsulting.com](http://www.GroteConsulting.com)