



white paper

Nine Keys to Adult Learning

1. Engage the Learner.

Learning is different than memorization. Learning only occurs when thinking happens. If an adult learner does not think deeply about the content—or “process” it—the content is soon discarded. If the learner is not mentally engaged, learning is blocked. Therefore, mental engagement is an absolute prerequisite for learning.

2. Penetrate the Selective Perception and Selective Retention Barriers.

Adult learners are bombarded with information. Consequently, they use a complex set of conscious and unconscious filters to decide what to pay attention to, and what to remember. How will your messages get through the filters?

3. Don't get quoted out of context.

Information lacking context has no “meaning” or “relevance” for a learner. Always connect content with a context that the learner understands, such as a sales situation. Explain or demonstrate how the information or skill can be put to use within a context that the learner is familiar with.

4. Don't do the learner's work for them.

Resist the temptation to demonstrate your knowledge at every turn. Be a mentor, not a preacher. Ask, don't tell. Find ways to help learners think through solutions and identify alternatives. Any time you can cause a learner to discover important information or skills for themselves, you have accomplished something worthwhile. The act of discovery (the “aha!”) is the most pleasurable experience in learning. “Discovered” information is remembered much longer than information that is spoon-fed by a teacher.

5. Put your training on a diet.

Less is more. An adult learner can only absorb a relatively small amount of new information within a short period of time. “Cramming” doesn't work the way it used to, if it ever did. Resist the temptation to explain everything about everything. Instead, sort and sift out the most essential, critical information and skills—the stuff that will contribute the most to successful performance—and focus on that. Otherwise you will soon find yourself pouring coffee into a filled cup (the learner's brain) and most of the coffee will wind up on the table.

6. Distinguish between know what and know-how.

All training and coaching topics are not equal. In some cases, a learner only needs a general “awareness” of a topic. In others, deep learning is essential. Know which is which, and make sure you don't spend more time on “know what” topics than those that demand “know-how.” And let the learner know the difference.

7. Make sense.

As you focus on the know-how topics, help the learner understand the “why.” Understanding is key to adult learning. If it “makes sense,” the learner will be able to reconstruct the knowledge or skill later, even if explicit memory of it is gone.

8. Prevent downshifting.

Adult learners “downshift” easily and quickly, meaning that they slip out of “learning mode” at the drop of a hat. Keep in mind the most common triggers for learner downshifting and avoid them.

- No clear “what’s in it for me?”
- Boredom.
- Feeling overwhelmed.
- Fear.
- Failure to understand or “get it.”
- Teacher/mentor arrogance, rigidity, or lack of credibility.

9. Lock in the learning.

Send in the reinforcements. If it’s worth covering once, it’s worth covering twice—or more. Content and skills that are not reinforced through repetition or practice evaporate quickly. You know the old cliché: “use it or lose it.” It’s never more true than in adult learning.

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