

Creating the physical environment for thinking

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Key learning points

- The environment affects how well we train.
- You can use light, colour, space and nature to create different learning environments.
- Different tasks need different thinking strategies and different environments.
- How to improve the training environment.
- Be demanding in terms of specification for training venues.

Case study 1

The performer froze on stage, unable to remember a word of the training presentation she had practised so meticulously beforehand. The audience had been patient for a while, but was now becoming restless. Unimpressed, they watched as she picked up her script to read from it at breakneck speed, desperate to get away from centre-stage. She had lost them by then; they had mentally switched off – some had even started to leave.

When she could finally look back over the worst training

experience of her life, she realised that the environment she had been asked to deliver the training in had affected her so badly that she could hardly function, let alone present herself or her material professionally and effectively. She had never before thought that the physical environment could be almost as important as the content and delivery of the training. The audience were perfectly happy with the surroundings, excited and expectant about what was to come. But she had let them, and herself, down badly.

Why should the environment be so important?

How many normally professional and competent trainers have had a similar experience? Even though the trainer in the case study was very experienced, she went into survival mode, having been forced to work in an environment that was totally inappropriate for its purpose and for her. Not only did she lose confidence, but she also lost future business because of it.

As experienced trainers, many of you will know that how someone prefers to think (their thinking style preferences) will affect how they prefer to learn.¹ That's great news for delegates, because as professional trainers we pay a lot of attention to helping them learn more effectively. But how many of us understand, or pay sufficient attention to, the ways in which our thinking styles affect how we prefer to train? Not many of us. And, believe it or not, our thinking styles also determine the kind of environment we tend to prefer and to work well in. So, not only should we think very carefully about how the environment can affect our delegates, and therefore the success of the training interventions we make; we should also carefully consider the environment we prefer to train in, as this is bound to impact on our performance as trainers.

“*know your venue and consider it from an environmental point of view*”

Case study 2

Contrast these two real examples of training events I have recently attended. One was held in a central London hotel, in a rectangular room with no natural light (no windows), and the bare walls were painted in light grey. The chairs were pushed tightly up against the walls owing to lack of space. The hotel was situated on the corner of a major road junction, and the only break-out space was in a tiny lobby area off a gloomy corridor.

The other was in a large, square training room, flooded with daylight. The wooden tables and seating arrangements were flexible and there was plenty of space (though not too much). The walls were painted in cool blues and creams, hung with paintings and attractive curtains. The break-out space was a spacious central atrium with a glass roof overlooking a lawn.

Here are some questions to consider:

- Which training venue and training room would you have preferred as the trainer or delegate?
- What types of thinking would be encouraged by the second venue?
- How would you have improved the first venue if you had been stuck with it?

Helpful hints for preparation

- Know your venue and consider it from an environmental point of view.
- Be demanding in terms of your specification for training venues.
- Ask yourself how the 'stage needs to be set' to achieve your outcomes.
- Develop effective relationships with training-venue managers so they will be more prepared to help you. Always thank them afterwards.
- Do not necessarily accept the Central London hotel room or the small meeting/training room. You can usually find a better venue.
- Buy your own vase, flowers, fresh fruit and coloured (scented) pens and take them with you.

Authors

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Environmental checklist

- What tasks or types of thinking will you be doing?
- Do you need visual complexity or should things be uncluttered?
- How much natural light is there? Are there requirements for task-focused lighting?
- Are the size and shape of the room appropriate for the size of the group?
- Where are the break-out spaces? Are they suitable?
- Would a view or interesting perspective be helpful or distracting?
- How can you 'bring the outside in'?
- Is the furniture appropriate – flexible, natural materials, comfortable?
- What are the noise levels? Is there any distracting background noise?
- How much fresh air is there? Will opening the windows increase the noise levels?
- How can you introduce colour for visual impact if the room needs it?
- How can you cater for the kinaesthetic learners who will want to move around?

Remember that people are inherently flexible and adaptable. Just as you will undoubtedly adapt to your training environment, so will your delegates. Don't make it difficult for them or yourself – if you can create an environment which helps you and your delegates relax, you will be helping them to learn more effectively and helping yourself to become a master trainer.

Acknowledgement

Photos courtesy of the Möller Centre, Management Training and Conference Venue, Cambridge.

References

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Setting the stage

Questions to ask yourself

Just as the stage set is an integral part of the dramatic acting performance, so the training room is an integral and critical part of the training performance and the delegates' learning experience. Whatever the event, think about the following questions:

- What impact do you want to create?
- What atmosphere do you want?
- What lighting do you need?
- How can you best use the space?
- Does sound carry and is there extraneous noise?

Vision

Stage lighting is critical for setting the mood and encouraging the audience to focus on the action. Think about the lighting you need to encourage your delegates to focus on their tasks.

Daylight or artificial light?

There is increasing evidence that daylight is essential for performance.² Because our eyes evolved to adjust to the naturally changing brightness and contrasts of daylight, unchanging artificial light tires the eyes, which can lead to headaches and poor concentration.³ Natural light makes colours more realistic, defines shapes more effectively and encourages the eyes to relax.

Views

Using rooms with windows which have short- and long-range views allows the eye to change focus between near and far objects of interest. This keeps the brain occupied and allows both our eyes and our brains to relax periodically. Views connect people to the natural world and provide a time orientation, even in the middle of a city.

Tip

Views are particularly important for those with a strong visual thinking preference. Looking at the view does not mean they are not concentrating.

Sound

Sound and background noise can be particularly intrusive for those people who have a particular preference for auditory thinking. The trainer in *Case study 1* suffered from a very high level of extraneous noise which she could not shut out.

Hints

- 1 Small group work can lead to higher levels of noise than some people may be comfortable with, so utilise break-out rooms if you have them, or the corners of the room if you don't.
- 2 Foliage absorbs noise.
- 3 Water features can be an option.
- 4 The sound of the English weather can also be used as a training aid. When the wind howls and the rain lashes the windows, delegates seem to focus more effectively on the task at hand and huddle together for psychological warmth.

Bringing the outside in

Studies in hospitals have shown that patients with views of trees and greenery get well more quickly than those in control groups who have no view of the natural environment. Bring the outside in to your training room as follows:

- Use natural materials such as wood or stone.
- Use plants and flowers.



- Make use of natural light sources.
- Consider installing a water fountain.
- Seat delegates so they can see a view. Make use of scenic pictures if you have no view.
- If you are involved in designing the specification for a training venue, consider a glass-roofed atrium, or arrange for a venue at the top of a building, to enhance the sensation of light and air.

Colour

Colour invokes a physical reaction, which affects our moods, mental clarity and energy levels.⁴ Colours need to stimulate or relax, not to distract or be overbearing. Remember that colour preferences are very personal.

Tips

- Consider painting one wall (the 'training' wall) in a slightly darker shade than the other walls in the room, to offer some stimulation.
- Use calming, neutral colours for the other walls.
- Use a minimum of two colours on your flipcharts, on alternate lines.
- Use strong colours as accents; red and orange stimulate, yellow enhances concentration, blue increases productivity. Blue and green tend to be calming.⁵

Avoid these:

- Over-stimulation through too much use of strong colours.
- Colour clashes – they tire the eye and can lead to task confusion and slow reactions.
- Monotone – too little stimulation can lead to anxiety or boredom, or induce sleep.
- Grey – it's too passive and tends to absorb light, making it appear darker.
- White – one study showed this resulted in a 25 per cent drop in efficiency.⁶

Designing the space and using shape

Like a stage, your training venue needs to be flexible:

- Avoid using too large a room – people may feel lost.
- Very small rooms will tend to shut people down.
- Use circles and circular tables to direct people towards interaction.
- Centre the space around your delegates, rather than around you as the trainer. After all, you can move around the room more easily than they can.
- Arrive early and change the room layout if you need to. That makes a good first task and is an ice-breaker for delegates.

Creating the right environment for the task

As there is a right environment for your thinking styles, you can create environments which facilitate the types of thinking your delegates might need to undertake.

Creativity

People often get their most creative ideas in an environment that allows them to relax. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the type of environment you find relaxing will mimic your thinking style preferences in some way:

- Visual and strategic thinkers might enjoy panoramic views.
- Taking part in a physical activity would reflect a kinaesthetic preference.
- Listening to music is a common strategy for auditory thinkers.
- Detailed and complexity thinkers might enjoy completing difficult jigsaw puzzles.

Ask yourself these questions:

- What kind of environment or activities encourage your creativity?
- What physical environment stifles your creativity?

Avoid these:

- enclosed spaces
- clutter or mess
- too much noise

- over-complex details
- over-bright lighting
- too bright or too dark blocks of colour
- poor visual surroundings.

Strategic visioning

If you need to facilitate a strategic meeting of the board, consider how the environment could be designed to encourage the board members' strategic thinking skills. First, what thinking skills and strategies might they require? These may include the following:

- Clarity of thought.
- Vision and perspective.
- Big chunk / strategic thinking for the long term.
- Attention, concentration and focused listening.
- A balance of simplicity and complexity thinking – being able to simplify complex issues whilst understanding the underlying complexity.
- Temporal flexibility – the ability to think forwards and backwards over time.
- Options thinking – alternative scenario planning.
- Logical, sequential and linear thinking.
- Making connections.

A view with distance and perspective seems to encourage the brain to think more strategically and long term. A relaxing and comfortable environment is critical for helping people to make connections. Enough space is also vital; enclosed, gloomy rooms tend to shut our thinking down. Why do you think that most 'good' board rooms are big spaces equipped with plush curtains, comfortable chairs, expensive pictures and windows with views?