A Trainer's Guide for Helping
Subject Matter Experts Facilitate Learning

Effective
SMEs

Dale Ludwig and Greg Owen-Boger

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Contents

Introduction

If you've ever worked with subject matter experts (SMEs) in the training room, you know they can bring depth of experience, credibility, and relevance to live instructor-led training. The stories they tell enrich the process and offer learners insight into how someone who works in the business thinks about their portion of it. When SMEs deliver training, their institutional knowledge is transferred to others. For these reasons, the value their contribution brings to the organization is immeasurable.

Reliance on SMEs (we pronounce it *smees*) also brings with it a certain amount of risk. After all, they are not experts in talent development. They are *subject matter experts*. While they want to do well in the classroom, it is an environment unfamiliar to them. Often, SMEs assume that simply presenting information leads inevitably to understanding and learning. In many cases, they struggle to assume the learner's perspective when speaking from their own. Left unchecked, they may want to include everything they know about their topic. Any combination of these risks can result in disengaged, frustrated learners. And, in the long term, this negatively affects both the business and the reputation of talent development.

As learning professionals, we need to do all we can to help SMEs use their expertise to serve the learning process. That means that materials should be developed with the SMEs' needs in mind. Their strengths and weaknesses as communicators should be taken into account. SMEs should be coached to deliver information clearly, set up and debrief learning activities, and facilitate fruitful discussions. They also need permission and freedom to make the delivery of the content their own. Without this support, SMEs will not be set up for a successful learning conversation.

The challenge for instructional designers (IDs), though, is that providing this support is difficult to do, given their responsibilities in the process. For example:

- In their attempt to help the SME deliver content clearly, designers may produce a script that the SME struggles to follow.
- In the name of accuracy, they may produce overly complex materials that confuse SMEs and learners.
- To keep the learning process lively, they may include activities that look good on paper but are difficult for SMEs to facilitate.
- In the spirit of consistency, they may lock down the design, unintentionally discouraging SMEs from "making it their own."
- By offering SMEs advice on facilitation best practices, they may inadvertently increase SMEs' anxiety about delivery.

While the tension between the SME's needs and the ID's goals will never be fully resolved, it can be understood and managed. In the pages that follow, we will focus on how this is done.

About This Book

Each of us has more than 20 years of experience helping presenters, facilitators, leaders, trainers, IDs, and SMEs to be better communicators. This book brings together what we've learned in that time and applies it specifically to designing for and coaching SMEs who are responsible for delivering training. We'll focus on the parts of the design, development, and delivery processes that have a direct impact on the SME in the classroom.

Our goal is to help you manage SME-led training efficiently and effectively. We begin by taking a step back to look at what a successful training event is—how it succeeds and why. This will give you a baseline for the design and delivery recommendations that follow and make coaching SMEs—an often-overlooked part of the process—easier. From there, we focus on two parts of the process: how learning events can be designed with the needs of SMEs in mind, and best practices for coaching SMEs to deliver training efficiently and effectively.

Underlying all our recommendations is the notion that SMEs and instructional designers must be comfortable with the role the other plays. Once the

design is complete, instructional designers must give SMEs the freedom to make it their own during delivery. SMEs must trust designers' expertise and work with them to find the best way to bring what they know to the learning process. This trust and cooperation is essential for their mutual success.

Criteria for Selecting Instructional SMEs

It goes without saying that SMEs must be experts in the subject matter they deliver. However, being an expert isn't enough. The person who is selected also needs to have the skills—or be able to develop the skills—to deliver training and ensure that knowledge and new skills are applied back on the job.

In addition to a good skill set, it's in everyone's best interest that the SME be easy to work with. In our experience, there is sometimes a degree of mistrust between instructional designers and SMEs. SMEs may doubt that instructional designers know what they're doing, and instructional designers often don't trust SMEs to follow the plan they've created. Trust, openness, and a willingness to learn must be present on both sides.

If we lived in a perfect world, you would be able to select the SME or SMEs you partner with on any given training initiative. Unfortunately, the world of many, if not most, IDs is not perfect. Other people make the decisions, and SMEs are selected for a variety of reasons that may or may not have anything to do with how effective they will be in the training room.

We believe that the stakes are too high and the risks too great for selecting the wrong person. The SMEs' reputations within their organizations can be harmed if they fail to be effective. That can, over time, damage the reputation of talent development. If SME-led training is too ineffective and learners feel as if their time is wasted repeatedly, why would they want to participate again?

Because it is so important for the right people to be in the right positions, we have created a job aid, Criteria for Selecting Instructional SMEs, that should be taken into consideration when SMEs are selected to facilitate learning, which you'll find in the appendix. Use this list to influence whoever is the decision maker.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for two types of readers: instructional designers who develop learning to be delivered by SMEs, and talent development professionals who coach SMEs to be effective in the classroom. We realize that in many cases these roles—designer, coach, and trainer—are not distinct. Learning professionals often deliver training in partnership with SMEs, and SMEs are often involved in the design process, each providing coaching and feedback to one another. Our goal, though, is to focus on the unique challenges SMEs face when they bring their expertise into the training room and offer practical ways that you, as a talent development professional, can help them succeed.

Throughout *Effective SMEs,* we will assume that you are already comfortable consulting with SMEs during the analysis and content development phases and proficient in instructional design. If this is not the case, you'll still gain knowledge from these pages. We do, however, recommend two books, both written by Chuck Hodell and published by ATD Press: *ISD From the Ground Up,* 4th edition, and *SMEs From the Ground Up.*

While some readers will benefit from reading this book from beginning to end, others may find it more helpful to use as a reference guide when the need arises. Regardless of which type of reader you are, we recommend that everyone read part 1, where we lay the foundation for the chapters that follow.

Part 1: First Things First

This section introduces baseline concepts for all facilitators of learning:

- **Chapter 1:** "The Fundamentals of the Training Conversation"—All live learning events should be designed and delivered as if they are "orderly conversations."
- **Chapter 2:** "All Trainers Have a Default Approach"—Everyone defaults to one side or the other of orderly conversations.

Part 2: Designing for SMEs

This section presents actionable recommendations to be used when designing for SME delivery:

- **Chapter 3:** "Frame the Learning Conversation"—Use a strategy to set context and gain learner buy-in quickly.
- **Chapter 4:** "Consider the SME's Strengths"—Develop training with SMEs' strengths and weaknesses in mind.
- **Chapter 5:** "Creating Facilitator Guides and Slide Decks"—These materials serve two purposes and must be designed to support both.
- **Chapter 6:** "Designing Training Activities"—Learn the pros and cons of SME-led training activities and recommendations for designing them for success.

Part 3: Coaching SMEs to Facilitate Learning

This section offers nonthreatening tools and techniques for coaching SMEs to be effective once they get into the classroom:

- **Chapter 7:** "Helping SMEs Succeed"—Set expectations, prepare SMEs for delivery, and apply the SORT Coaching Model when coaching SMEs.
- **Chapter 8:** "Getting Engaged in the Training Conversation"—It's important to be genuinely engaged in the training conversation and know how to coach SMEs to achieve it.
- **Chapter 9:** "Coaching to Deliver Content"—Help SMEs plan to be spontaneous using the materials that you've provided them.
- **Chapter 10:** "Coaching SMEs to Manage Q&A and Other Types of Interactions"—Help SMEs manage the organic give-and-take of interactive training sessions.

Part 4: Advanced Situations

This section addresses situations that may arise only in certain circumstances:

- **Chapter 11:** "Coaching SMEs to Deliver Locked-Down Legacy Content"—Coach SMEs to deliver content that cannot be changed.
- **Chapter 12:** "Working With SMEs to Train in the Virtual World"—Here's what to do when the SME has to deliver training online.
- **Chapter 13:** "Working With SMEs on Video"—Here's what to do when it's necessary for SMEs to be on video.

Part 1
First Things First

Part 1 lays the groundwork for this book and should be read by everyone. It is divided into two chapters. The first chapter focuses on the fundamental principles of training delivery in the business environment. Communicating these principles to SMEs will help them get comfortable with their responsibilities and be more effective facilitators of learning.

The second chapter is about understanding that every SME (and every instructional designer) has a default approach to the training delivery process. Acknowledging that a SME's default plays an important role in how they think about and respond to the pressures of delivery is an important first step toward flexible design and effective coaching.

1

The Fundamentals of the Training Conversation

The ideas in this book are built on the notion that live training events—whether delivered in face-to-face or virtual environments—succeed because they are conversations. They are an exchange of information, attitudes, and beliefs between facilitator and learner. While a training conversation is different from an everyday, informal conversation, the two share two significant qualities. First, the individuals involved are always responding to one another. Second, based on these responses, the conversation takes on a life of its own.

You're probably wondering how a planned training session, with slides on a screen and participant and facilitator guides at the ready, can possibly be spontaneous. You may think that a high level of preparation prohibits any degree of spontaneity. But that's not the case. The plan always serves the conversation. The conversation, and all its lively spontaneity, leads the way.

In our first book, *The Orderly Conversation,* we encouraged business presenters to move away from a traditional public-speaking approach to business presentations and toward a more realistic and practical one. Business presentations— as well as training delivered by SMEs—are structured and focused, but they take place in a spontaneous, interactive environment. Success in both situations requires understanding and managing the tension between the plan and its execution.

This is especially true for SMEs, because it is their job to bring nuance to the learning conversation. They focus on the real-life application of information and help learners think about content from an enterprise-wide perspective. The SME's personal experience, depth of knowledge, and perspective is an important part of the conversation, but is not always part of the plan.

The challenge, though, is that SMEs are subject matter experts, not training or facilitation experts. They need to know how to use the stories they tell, trust the facilitation process to bring up learning points, be open and responsive, and so on. They need guidance and support from everyone else involved in training design and delivery to understand the fundamentals of training conversations.

The Fundamental Principles

There are three fundamental principles for the success of SMEs in the training room:

1. Trainers and learners are equals with a shared purpose.
2. Learning events succeed on two levels, the plan and the process.
3. Design and delivery must focus on initiating and managing the learning conversation.

Trainers and Learners Are Equals With a Shared Purpose

Many SMEs come into the training process with ideas about teaching that they learned in school. This is natural, given that most of us have years of experience in academic classrooms and have a clear sense of how that teacher-student relationship works. However, training in the business environment is not the same thing.

Here's an example of what we mean. A few years ago, we were working with a SME on the delivery of his training session. He was struggling with the notion that he needed to focus more on helping learners understand what he was delivering. "The way I look at it," he said, "it's my job to deliver the content, and it is their job to understand it." If this seems familiar to you, it's because all of us at one point or another have been in the same position as his learners.

Let's look at this in more detail. Imagine a large university lecture hall. At the front of the room is a well-known professor, famous for the research she has done

in her field. This professor has credibility, but she's an ineffective teacher. Her lectures are a regurgitation of notes written years before, and the slides on the screen are difficult to see and understand. During class, students take notes. As they do this, they try to understand what they hear and, probably most important, figure out what will be included on the test. In this environment, students are responsible for their own learning. Their evaluation, the grade they earn, is dependent on how well they manage it.

Because SMEs grew up with this type of learning, it feels natural to apply it in the business setting. However, it's an inappropriate approach for some fundamental reasons, beyond what we commonly discuss as "adult learning." To understand why, let's compare academic and business settings from three perspectives: who holds the power in the room, how learning is evaluated, and how learning is used or applied.

Who Holds the Power?

Academic Setting: In the academic classroom, the professors hold the power. They are paid to deliver information to students over the course of the class. The students, through their tuition, pay to receive this information. It's a fairly one-sided exchange, where the responsibility for success falls to the student.

Business Setting: In the corporate training room, the business holds the power. Trainers and learners are in the classroom to serve the needs of the organization, and they are all paid to be there. Learning is part of the learner's job. Facilitating learning is the instructor's job. As far as the business is concerned, their roles are equally important.

How Is Learning Evaluated?

Academic Setting: When they enroll in the class, students give the professor the power to evaluate their work when the class is over. To succeed, students must meet the standards set by the professor. The grade a student receives is not necessarily an accurate reflection of what was learned, though. It simply reflects how well the professor's standards were met. As you remember from your days as a student, there were classes in which you received a high grade and learned very little. There were probably other classes in which you received a lower grade and learned a great deal. In both situations, delivery was driven solely by the learning design, rather than how information was received by learners.

Business Setting: There are no final grades in the business environment. Rather, the learning process is evaluated in real time. The trainer's responsibility is to ensure, as much as possible, that learning is taking place in the moment. This requires making the learning process as easy, efficient, and relevant as possible. For this to happen, the trainer needs to be engaged and adaptable to learners' needs. The focus needs to be on learner understanding, what is important, and how ideas relate to one another.

How Is Learning Used or Applied?

Academic Setting: Success in an academic classroom sets you up for success in the next class (from 101 to 201, for example). Sometimes it simply enriches your life after graduation. Either way, the application of information that is learned is the responsibility of the student. It is not the professors' concern. Their power is limited to a particular classroom. They may hope that students find what they have learned useful, but they have no control or financial interest in that.

Business Setting: The learning that happens in the training room must be applied by learners on the job. This is what the business is paying for. This is most obvious when training focuses on work processes (such as onboarding or technical training). It is also important for soft skills training (communication or negotiation, for example), because it has a direct effect on how people execute their responsibilities. This relevance needs to be reinforced throughout the course. If it's not, learners may not know how to use the information they're learning.

It's important to help SMEs understand the nature of the training process, their role in facilitating it, and the relationship they need to build with learners. When they do, they will see that it is their responsibility to make learners feel welcome, respected, and safe. That takes us to the second fundamental principle.

Learning Events Succeed on Two Levels: Plan and Process

Creating the conditions conducive for learning—a sense of equality, respect, safety, relevance, and shared purpose—requires recognizing the distinction between learning objectives and the learning process. Learning objectives are planned and the learning process is managed. Once SMEs understand their dual responsibilities, they're much more likely to succeed in the classroom.

From the learners' perspective, the live training process requires a sustained level of engagement and focus. Unlike asynchronous delivery, for example, learners do not have the option to pause the process, back it up, or complete it another day. They give those options up when they enter the training room, just as they did when they entered the academic classroom. The difference in business, however, is that facilitators are responsible for making sure learners feel good about that decision. They do this by managing the learning process well and creating the conditions for fruitful learning.

So while meeting learning objectives is the SME's primary goal, it cannot be reached effectively or efficiently without learner engagement. That requires bringing the instructional design and all its components into the here and now of the learning conversation, making whatever is taught understandable, relevant, and useful for each learner. Facilitators must be relentless in their effort to adapt and respond. When they do, trust is established and good will is earned. For these reasons, the SMEs' success in the training room must be measured on two levels (Figure 1-1).

Figure 1-1. Learning Events Succeed on Two Levels

First Level The Plan	Second Level The Process
Meet the learning objectives	**Manage the learning conversation**
Create a learner-centric plan	Create the conditions for fruitful learning
Develop materials to support learning	Sustain engagement and focus

Recognizing this gives us a good way to talk about the struggle SMEs face. They not only need to focus on learning objectives and the learning process, but also have the additional responsibility of fitting their expertise into both.

This brings us to the third fundamental principle.

Design and Delivery Must Focus on Initiating and Managing the Learning Conversation

The learning conversation, just like other forms of business communication, is an orderly conversation. That means it is an outcome-oriented event that is prepared and well organized, and takes place in a responsive, conversational way. Using this definition, we can move away from traditional lecturing techniques, often preferred by SMEs, and toward a more responsive, flexible, and listener-focused approach. Therefore, the third fundamental principle is that learning design and delivery must focus on helping the SME initiate and manage the learning conversation. When this does not happen, learning suffers, as you'll see in the following example.

> **Save Your Questions for the End**
>
> As part of an organization-wide initiative, Liz had recently taken on a new role in L&D.
>
> She'd worked as part of the delivery team on a few successful training programs in the past, so it seemed like a logical move for her. Liz had always prided herself on her attention to detail and her methodical approach to the work that she did as a systems analyst.
>
> Knowing that her precision had served her well in the past, she applied this approach to the first training initiative that she led. However, despite having the best of intentions, her plans did not go well.
>
> Her new manager, Rory, called us and asked us to work with Liz and see if we could help. To do that, we read her course evaluations from the failed workshop and interviewed some of the learners. We heard comments such as:
> - "Liz didn't allow for questions to be asked. She said that if we had questions, we should save them for the end of the day. She was nice enough about it, but it was just weird."
> - "I don't think she meant it, but she was a bit condescending. At one point, we were discussing what I thought was a gray area in our procedures, and she made it sound very black and white. My manager is always saying 'it depends, and here's why. . . .' Liz didn't like it much when I brought that up."

> » "On the evaluation, I gave her relatively high scores because I didn't want negative comments to be traced back to me. Liz and I are friends."
>
> After the interviews, we worked with Liz to hear her side of the story. "I want things to be just right," she said. "I was nervous because it was my first training event in my new role. I was given slides and a facilitator guide. There was a lot there. I was nervous about the content, so I figured I had to memorize everything. During my dry runs getting ready for the training event, I rehearsed everything I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. I even practiced where to stand and when to gesture. Once the big day came and people started asking questions, I freaked out! They pulled me off course, I forgot where I was, and I lost my confidence. It was awful."
>
> The coaching that we provided hinged on helping Liz shift from a lecture-based approach to a conversational approach. This was a big change for her, but she came to realize that as a learner, she actually prefers a looser style herself. She explained, "It's strange to make that realization. I love a good debate, when there's a lot of back and forth in the classroom. When I'm in training as a learner, I get bored when someone just lectures. Why in the world did I think I should do that myself? Good grief. I feel as if I should apologize to that group of learners."

In our work with instructional designers and SMEs, we have often found that the transition from the planning stage to delivery is rocky. The designer's desire to be as clear and useful as possible bumps up against the SME's need for freedom and control. This is often compounded by the SME's inexperience in the training role to begin with. So the third foundational concept has to do with the transition from what the plan sets out to accomplish and how the SME actually accomplishes it.

As Dwight Eisenhower said, "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything." This is important for both instructional designers and SMEs to remember because while planning plays a crucial role in the process, it alone cannot guarantee success. As Figure 1-2 shows, design must anticipate the conversation and all of its uncertainties. Delivery is about adapting what was designed to what is happening in the moment with a specific group of learners.

Figure 1-2. The Orderly Conversation: Anticipating and Adapting
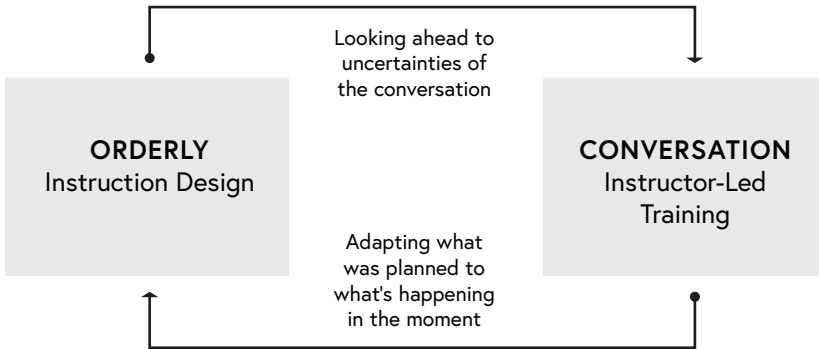
These three fundamental principles will be discussed and applied throughout this book, because they apply to both instructional design and coaching SMEs in the training room.

Summary

Face-to-face training events are conversations. They succeed when they are an exchange of information, attitudes, and beliefs between facilitator and learner. The planning that takes place before a workshop must be done in anticipation of this conversation. When it does, it makes training delivery more efficient and effective. This is especially important when SMEs are facilitating. It is the SMEs' job to bring nuance and depth to the conversation. The challenge is that they are not facilitation experts. They need guidance and support.

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