

# It's a Beautiful Day in the Training Room

BY STEPHANIE HUBKA

I could see the fatigue in their eyes. More than a year of virtual team meetings and endless hours of screen time dulled their gazes. Their mute buttons silenced the sounds of life happening around them: kids in virtual school, barking dogs, the crash of a pan as someone made lunch.

I empathized with them; I know those struggles well. On this day, though, it was my job to train them. And as I looked at the learners through my own screen, wondering what success would look like for the weary group, it was someone else's voice that echoed in my ears: "There are three ways to ultimate success: The first way is to be kind. The second way is to be kind. The third way is to be kind."

Generations of children learned critical life lessons from Fred Rogers, the humble star of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* who delighted and educated many of us for more than 30 years. And some of those children—the luckiest, perhaps—grew up to become trainers. In talent development, we know our most fundamental training strategy is to treat our learners as adults: Connect new information to past experiences. Treat them with respect. Honor what makes them unique.





Mister Rogers's  
memorable lessons and  
strategies apply just  
as well to trainers.

As it turns out, Mister Rogers knew us just as well as we know ourselves, and the secret to our success in any delivery method can be linked to the lessons we have known since childhood.

## Create something

In an increasingly virtual world, creation may be the antidote to death by PowerPoint. In his show, Mister Rogers often included opportunities to create something new, and many episodes featured him as he encouraged young artists to draw, baked birthday cakes, and made gifts for the people in his neighborhood. The joy he felt when he made something is still relatable today.

Think about the last time you created something. Maybe you knitted a scarf, painted a picture, or made dinner. Chances are you felt good when you were done and had something to show for your time and effort. Those feelings have a powerful place when delivering training either virtually or in person.

Consider how you can build an opportunity for learners to feel accomplishment and pride as their knowledge and skills contribute to a session's success. Incorporate activities that provide space for creativity, brainstorming, and collaboration. Asking your learners to have some fun can make a course feel like recess—and above all else, training should be enjoyable for everyone.

**Incorporate rapid prototyping.** It can be a lot of fun to create something with colleagues, and it can be even better when a team feels like it is contributing a real solution to a real problem. When designing training, add an opportunity for learners to prototype a solution to a real challenge they are facing.

**Integrate a scenario.** Share a story or example with learners, and ask them to think through how they would respond to it based on what they have learned during your session. The interactive opportunity can inspire creative thinking, which in turn can help them recognize the connection between what they are learning and how they can use it in their roles.

## Embrace silence

Many of us fear silence in any classroom; after all, there's nothing more deafening than the quiet that accompanies an unanswered question. Mister Rogers rejected the idea that people may prefer noise to silence. In fact, he encouraged silence and called it "nourishing." When delivering training, embrace silence as you use it to a learner's advantage.

Silence provides space to reflect, process, and connect new information to past experiences. Although it may be tempting to send learners off to do that homework after a training unit ends, build quiet time into it to encourage processing and thinking right away.

**Ask questions, and give space for answers.** Instead of clarifying or providing context after asking a question, let learners think in silence. Offering them that time allows them to process their thoughts and prepare their answers more completely.

**Provide opportunities for reflection.** Build breaks into your course for quiet reflection or writing in a journal, which can help learners track their ideas and consider how they will apply their experience to their work. Even brief pauses can be instrumental—whether you provide questions to consider or encourage unstructured processing, silence can be a true act of kindness for everyone.

## Encourage storytelling

As trainers, we know that storytelling is a powerful way to learn something new, and Mister Rogers knew that too. In addition to incorporating his own stories and those of his neighbors into each episode, he also noted that, "I find out more and more every day how important it is for people to share their memories."

Storytelling encourages the kind of vulnerability and compassion that Mister Rogers championed when working with children. We can use storytelling in a similar way. Human brains are wired to receive stories—they will connect what they process to the stories from an individual's past, and they will build story lines to link new information and make retention easier.

**Tell stories.** Weave your own stories into training delivery to bring new concepts to life. There is a big difference between telling someone why a lesson is important and showing them through an example. Training employees on the importance of updating a database may seem mundane, but what if you share the story about the day you saved a stakeholder meeting by pulling exactly the right data your manager needed moments before she presented it—all because a team member had correctly input that data into the system? That's a memorable story that may inspire colleagues to connect their motivation to do great work to impact and outcomes.

**Encourage storytelling.** Your stories can bring training delivery to life, and your learners' stories can be just as effective. Save space in your course to ask learners to share their own stories. Open-ended questions such as "Has this ever happened to you?" can invite them to be part of the conversation by using their experiences to connect to your learning outcomes. The stories can highlight examples and drive your session forward, and the opportunity for engagement can help learners feel that they are a valuable part of the training experience.

## Look for helpers

One of Mister Rogers's most famous quotes encouraged viewers to look for the helpers, the people making things better for those around them in challenging times. Helping others is central to the human experience, and when delivering training, we have a unique opportunity to encourage that quality in our learners and build it into the sessions we create.

Asking for help can be vulnerable and receiving it can be encouraging. It acknowledges that no one person has every answer, but when we work collaboratively, we unlock much more than we can on our own. When designing training, incorporate activities that encourage asking for and receiving help. Give learners

the chance to hear from others, recognize their colleagues' expertise, and contribute their knowledge and ideas in new ways.

**Engage volunteers.** Ask for volunteers to facilitate peer-led discussions in small groups or virtual breakout rooms. That can instill a sense of leadership in your learners that can help them showcase their skills and knowledge as they simultaneously learn from others.

**Use mentors.** Build opportunities for learners to mentor one another. Whether using a mentor-mentee model or building a peer mentoring experience, this opportunity opens the door to hearing new ideas and information while also strengthening relationships between co-workers.

### Love what you do

If you have ever worked with someone who truly loves their job, you know what that looks like in practice. They have a sense of joy and drive that is often contagious; you can't help but be inspired by their focus and passion. For a trainer, those traits can make the difference between a standard training event and one that leads to real change for learners and organizations alike.

Mister Rogers knew the power love can have in the workplace and the impact it can have on success. He famously said, "The thing I remember best about successful people I've met all through the years is their obvious delight in what they're doing, and it seems to have very little to do with worldly success. They just love what they're doing, and they love it in front of others."

You may know someone who fits that description, and you may also realize that someone is you. If that is the case, you have an incredible gift to share with learners.

**Get excited.** Of all the delivery techniques that exist, your own enthusiasm may be the one that resonates best with learners. When a topic or example excites you, let that excitement guide the examples, stories, and words you choose to convey it. It may feel vulnerable, but excitement has a place in our professional lives, and it is key to connecting new information to the age-old question "What's in it for me?" (WIIFM). You can help learners understand why something is important and also help them look forward to applying it in their day-to-day work.

**Engage learners.** Your learners' excitement can be just as powerful as your own. Trainers love to be part of light bulb moments, when we can visibly see someone learning something new or recognizing how they can apply new knowledge and skills to their work. When you see that happen, encourage that person to bring others along for their journey. When a learner can

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share their own real-world example or explain how they plan to apply what they have learned, that one light bulb may inspire a few others to turn on as well.

**Ask learners to share what they love about their work.** We have many motivations for why we work hard, and our learners do too. Use what they love about their work as a catalyst for engagement when delivering training. Take a moment to ask them what they love about their work. The question can do so much more than connect to a learner's WIIFM; it can unlock their professional curiosity, ground them in their learning experience, and deepen the meaning they can derive from their time with you. It can encourage them to frame what success can look like to them in a whole new way.

### Above all, deliver kindness

Today, there is little that society needs more of than kindness. In workplaces that are often marked by deadlines, obstacles, and change, kindness bridges gaps and reminds individuals that they are valued and important. Treat each of your learners with kindness. Thank them for their focus and participation. Honor their experiences and personal stories. Encourage them to connect and learn from and with each other. Those steps can feel simple, but their impact can resonate long after a training session ends and learners return to their to-do lists.

Knowing your audience is essential to successful training delivery, and knowing what kindness looks like to them can foster engagement and trust from the start.

**Ask them how they are.** Start your sessions with this simple question, and listen to what learners share with you. A group that is feeling the weight of challenging work and overscheduled days may appreciate the kindness that comes from sharing how they are feeling that day. They may offer insights that can help you personalize their experience.

**Embrace differences.** Different opinions, views, and conflict seep into training delivery, and those differences can lead to great moments of learning for everyone. Meet all differences with kindness; encourage empathy, listening, and understanding as part of the training experience.

**Facilitate with kindness.** Model kindness for your learners. Treat them with respect, support them as they learn, and celebrate their successes.

Mister Rogers often reminded that you could make a day special "just by being you." As trainers, we have the power to instill the same kind of warmth, positivity, and value into every experience we deliver. That's what makes the opportunity to train with kindness so inviting, and its why kindness may be the secret to your next successful delivery.

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