



# Seven ways to get participants back on time!

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One of the most common challenges for trainers is getting the group to refocus and return to their seats after an activity. This is particularly true if it is a noisy activity or one which ends in much laughter.

Similarly, a lot of time can be lost to the trainer when their group does not return in a timely fashion after a break. Unless the trainer is keen on going hoarse by repeatedly calling them back, they need some other weapons in the armory to facilitate success.

Some months ago I went to my 'brains trust' of colleagues and asked for their best ideas for getting participants back on time. Here are seven of the best tips:

## Tune them in

To get their attention and get them moving back to their seats, pick a brief, up-beat song. Explain to the participants that every time they hear this tune, they will have 30 seconds left before the session resumes. In this way, the music acts as a transition between activities or is used to denote the conclusion of a break. You will be surprised at how effective this is.

As an extension, you can build this song selection into the program, as part of an opening activity. Simply encourage participants to select a 'theme song' for themselves, their group or their table as part of a get-to-know-you exercise. In the context of the opener, it could be used to say something about themselves or how they are feeling. For instance, someone may be pumped up for the day and selects "*Eye of the Tiger*" from Survivor or "*Roar*" by Katy Perry. The trainer can then give instructions around actions to be taken when they hear their theme song during the training.

Where is it not appropriate to use commercial music, the theme song could be selected by genre from a sample of royalty free music.

## Set a timer

Set a timer so the participants know exactly how much time they have. There are a variety of free countdown timers available on the web. Amongst the best is [www.online-stopwatch.com](http://www.online-stopwatch.com) which is suitable for both Mac and PC environments. As an extension, the trainer could give out playing cards for the people that make it back on time. At the end of the day, the person with a winning hand (either the best poker hand, highest sum, best card, etc.) wins a prize. People love free stuff. The better the prize, the more likely they are to be on time!

Rather than setting a break time of 20 minutes, set odd times for breaks like 13 minutes or 17 minutes.

In our train-the-trainer boot camp we use a variation of this where we award dots for people who are back on time and additional dots if their whole table is back on time. This creates a sense of mutual responsibility. Dots are awarded for a whole range of other things throughout the program and at the end of the workshop the participants tally up their dots and the people with the most dots get to select a prize from the prize table first.

## Set odd times

Rather than setting a break time of 20 minutes, set odd times for breaks like 13

minutes or 17 minutes. This will create a certain "stickiness" that helps participants to remember how long the break is. This also works for staff meetings - Instead of Monday meetings at 9am, try setting the meeting time for 9:11!

Alternatively, you could use a random selection for break times using dice, playing cards or bingo balls. The variety in break durations will be more memorable because they are different. As a result, participants are more likely to honour them.

## Make them responsible

Get someone else in the group to be responsible for coming back on time. Peer pressure can be used in a wholesome way to manage the late comers, without the trainer having to intervene. In a longer program the trainer can share the coveted role of 'timekeeper' across the group to further develop the idea of shared responsibility.

In this way, the timekeeper role is very transparent. However, as an alternative, you can give one of your slightly tardy participants a secret challenge (where they only win if no one knows that they have the role to get people back and everyone is back on time). This variation will have the effect of managing their late-coming behaviour, without impacting adversely on the rest of the group.

## Share the magic

Inspire the group by scheduling a magic trick immediately after a break. People can be intrigued by magic and a good, yet simple trick will give them an incentive to come back on time. You could build it up if you like, promising a truly mind-bending

activity after the break. (However, you will need to deliver upon the hype and have a well-rehearsed and visually stimulating trick!) A variation on the magic trick is to do the trick before the break and tell them you'll give them the instructions (or the secrets) after the break. Again there is some incentive to return on time.

## Text them

In between classes you can remind participants of key activities to be completed, resources to bring and the suggested commencement time of sessions. This will be particularly useful when training Generation Y candidates or busy professionals on the run. There are a plethora of web-based, mass text message applications available which could be used to support this activity. This includes:

- wiggio.com – Wiggio is a completely free, online toolkit that makes it easy to work in groups. Amongst other things it allows you to send email, text and voice messages for free.

- OhDontForget.com – Not only can you text people, you can schedule them for later delivery.
- Bloove.com – Get your phone contacts on the Bloove site, and then log in and manage them as well as send them text messages directly from the site.

## Reward them

When all else fails, bribe them with chocolates, coffee, bags, books or other prizes for returning on time. This may include resources that you were already planning to give away. However, by using it as an incentive, you have a chance to modify the group's behaviour. Over time, the participants will get into the routine of coming back when they should and you can wean them off the material prizes.

Ultimately, nothing beats creating training relationships built on mutual respect and trust and there is no magic bullet to compel participants to come back on time. However, these simple, yet effective

techniques will allow you to win time back more often than not and will give you the best chance of starting on time. ■

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