

Adult Learning Principles

PMM5 Postscript[™] Number 25

Background Information: Sandra Strick is the author of Strategies to Embrace the Adult Learner in *Professional Meeting Management*[®], fifth edition, (Chapter 18). In that chapter, she delves into:

- Characteristics of adult learners
- Adult learning principles
- Various learning styles (visual, kinesthetic, auditory)
- Elements of the learning environment
- Generational differences in adult learners

PMM5 Postscript[™] Use: This PMM5 Postscript[™] specifically focuses on the second area—adult learning principles. Meeting managers are in a unique position to focus on how people will respond to the meeting environment they establish as the planner. This PMM5 Postscript[™] guides meeting managers in the areas of adult learning. It offers information that meeting managers can use themselves as well as important information to convey to speakers and presenters. Readers may also be interested in PMM5 Postscript[™] Number 10 on training meetings or Number 24 on learning styles. This PMM5 Postscript[™] also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter.

Learner Outcomes: At the completion of this reading, you should be able to:

- Identify the eight aspects of a learning eco-system.
- Identify five characteristics of adult learners.
- Describe at least four factors that motivate adults.
- Apply a minimum of three tips for reaching audiences to your own meetings.

Related PMM5 Chapter: Chapter 18, Strategies to Embrace the Adult Learner
Author: Sandra Strick, Ph.D.



Can Adults Learn

Learning is not reserved for school-aged children. The concept of “learning” is usually used with reference to schools, training, and children. Do we really expect people to “learn” at a meeting? The concept of learning is not (or should not be) far removed from meetings. Meetings are used to exchange ideas, solve problems, convey information, and motivate or reward.

Define learning as “To come to be able to and to realize” and that definition makes the need to create a conducive learning environment a top priority in planning effective meetings.

Learning is a change in the way people feel, think or behave.

In order for people to exchange ideas, solve problems, hear new information or even understand the motivational message, they need to have an insight. Meeting participants need to be able to retain and absorb messages and information. Meetings are about learning.

Furthermore, the reality of today’s economic and technological environment requires that we all become life-long learners. Employees want to receive personal and professional development. Association members prioritize education and networking as a top priority for their membership.

Creating a Learning Environment

Glen Ramsborg identifies the eight aspects of a learning “eco-system.” He writes:

“Engaging the learner or attendee in the activity at hand is critical to the success of a meeting or event. With communication at the core of a learning environment ecosystem, internal and external factors influence the learner’s ability to learn and remember.

Components of this “learning” ecosystem are based on sound, scientific research. When dealing with the human, it is imperative to consider these eight scientific parameters in practical, usable terms.”

Ramsborg identifies the eight elements in a learning “eco-system”:

1. **Physiological** — We all learn using our senses. Vision is the primary sense and being able to hear also is critical. Consider temperature. Learning and attention spans decrease 6 to 10 percent for every degree the temperature goes above the comfort zone.
2. **Psychological** — The arrangement of the room, color and lighting of the surroundings have a major impact on thinking, listening and concentrating. The psychological impact of one’s surroundings, packaged together, impact a learner’s psyche.
3. **Emotional** — Knowing the audience is critical. Learning styles, educational level, the type of message being communicated have a profound on the individual. Emotional associations forged by words, attitudes, situations, concepts and example can impede or aid the process.
4. **Social/Cultural** — Socialization plays a significant part in the learning process. Often, the seed of learning is planted in the formal presentation and the learning comes from networking, discussing, and interacting outside, such as during refreshment breaks, luncheons, team building exercises or other group activities.

5. **Nutrition** — The food and beverage consumed by the learner prior to and during learning activities have a remarkable effect on attention span and the ability of the learner to concentrate, learn and remember.
6. **Physical** — The physical arrangement of the learning space sends a message to the learner. It can encourage participation or be a distraction. The physical arrangement conveys a clear but nonverbal assumption about the learner's relationship with not only each other but also meeting leadership.
7. **Technology** — Technology continues to have a significant place in the learning environment. The tendency is to forget that the learner usually comes to an event so see and hear a presentation – the person. One does not want them to leave saying, "That was a wonderful slide show!" and miss the message.
8. **Learning strategies** — All put together, the type of programming developed must be appropriate to the message being communicated, the environment created and the desired outcomes. Lectures, panel discussions, nature hikes, or whatever the learning strategy employed, must fit together as a package (Tinnish, 2002).

Unlocking the Adult Mind

Again, the science of learning can help meeting managers plan meetings with higher impact. Although meeting managers don't need to be neurobiologists, having some appreciation for how adults learn, retain and absorb information will create even more successful meetings and events.

Strick provides a comprehensive list of adult learning principles in *Professional Meeting Management*®, fifth edition (Strick, 2006, pp. 250–252). A shortened version of the list would include these five principles that meeting managers should keep in mind when planning meetings or events:

- Adults want to learn relevant, applicable information
- Adults need to be involved and favor interaction
- Adults like to be challenged and to have the opportunity to challenge
- Adults need to be able to build upon their own knowledge and experiences
- Adults learn differently and work at different rates because of each person's background, experiences, ability and learning styles

At least six factors serve as sources of motivation for adult learning. Adults may be motivated by:

- **Social relationships** — to make new friends, to meet a need for associations and friendships.
- **External expectations** — to comply with instructions from someone else; to fulfill the expectations or recommendations of someone with formal authority.
- **Social welfare** — to improve ability to serve mankind, prepare for service to the community, and improve ability to participate in community work.
- **Personal advancement** — to achieve higher status in a job, secure professional advancement, and stay abreast of competitors.
- **Escape/stimulation** — to relieve boredom, provide a break in the routine of home or work, and provide a contrast to other exacting details of life.
- **Cognitive interest** — to learn for the sake of learning, seek knowledge for its own sake, and to satisfy an inquiring mind.

Reaching the Audience

The meeting manager must convey the importance of communicating effectively to all speakers including internal and external presenters. In addition to structuring the event to promote learning, the meeting manager can advise and coach presenters. People speaking at a meeting should be prepared to:

- **Understand and acknowledge the participants' "whereabouts"** — Deal with the reality of the audience to establish rapport. The way the meeting is structured should always be striving to create rapport and relevance. Ask the question meeting participants are asking, "What's in this meeting for me?"
- **Break it up** — "The mind can only absorb what the butt can endure." There are good reasons for breaks. Moreover, there is a link between long-term memory and physical activity.
- **Provide variety (in style and methods)** — This will combat boredom but more importantly it will allow speakers to reach a wider range of the audience.
- **Provide opportunity for interaction** — Both informal and structured interaction should be part of the meeting. Group activities, case studies, question and answers are good elements to include.
- **Use unpredictability** — Keep audience on their toes with a bit of humor, unpredictability and variety.
- **Allow participants to share and display their skills and knowledge** — Akin to the thrill of "Show and Tell" in the early days of school, adults appreciate validation of their experiences and existing skill and knowledge.
- **Promote many modalities** — Offer people an opportunity to see, hear and write important messages. This approach appeals to multiple learning styles.
- **Allow for "down time" to absorb information** — Adults are looking to apply information; that application may occur through reflection, sharing ideas with colleagues, action planning, etc.

Preparing speaker guidelines for all presenters, citing external experts and sources, can help meeting managers navigate what can be a difficult task of coaching speakers. In addition to the above tips, encourage all speakers to:

- Read the audience
- Respond effectively to questions (Always say, "Yes... and" Never say, "Yes,but")
- Regulate voice and body language
- Use imagery techniques
- Selectively use examples, analogies, metaphors and stories
- Involve and encourage participation

Summary

Unlike school-aged children, adults represent a different paradigm for learning. Meeting managers are in a unique position to pay attention to how people will respond to the meeting environment they establish as the planner. Planners can base their decisions on scientific research into memory, learning and the functioning of the brain. Adult learning principles offer meeting managers insight into how participants will react to the meeting environment and experience planned. This insight is crucial for meeting managers as well as speakers and presenters.

Group Discussion or Projects

1. Adult learners attend meetings with years of experience and a wealth of information. How could a meeting manager highlight the strengths participants bring to the meeting?
2. Describe how adult learners might view the role of corporations in the process of “life-long learning”?
3. Describe how adult learners might view the role of associations in the process of “lifelong learning”?
4. What are the implications for adult learning in an increasingly global and mobile society?
5. Discuss how adult learning principles should guide the use of the following elements in a meeting?
 - Handouts
 - Presentation materials
 - Technology available on site
 - Marketing materials
 - Social interaction

References

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4. Tinnish, S. (2002, September). Learning Environments. *Tips for Innovative Meetings and Events*. Retrieved May 2007 from <http://www.suetinnish.com>.

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