

Creating a learning room that works

Space and learning

Robert J. Holder — Human Energy Systems

A trainer can create an environment which either enhances or limits thinking. Since thinking is the key to learning, the creation of a physical space supporting mental energy will enhance the effectiveness of training.

Many organizations which have begun quality and participation efforts began them as ad hoc initiatives. The space allotted for meeting and training in many cases was also ad hoc. The successes they have met with have in many cases been carried forward by sheer enthusiasm and certainly not by their surroundings or learning environment. Organizations which want to take their processes to a higher level should consider the quality and effectiveness of the physical area used for team meetings and learning. The first step in this direction requires consideration of three relationships, thinking and air quality, learning and color, and learning and music.

Thinking and air quality — A person's environment affects thinking in a number of ways. To begin with, the brain's performance is enhanced by the air quality of a space. For the mind to attain its full potential, it must receive an adequate supply of enriching oxygen. Brain function is inhibited by air pollutants which are commonly found in the home, office and factory space. These pollutants include smoke and household chemicals. In a closed room or home these pollutants can build up over time and lead to diminished thinking ability. What's worse is that a person may get used to this lower level of thinking, and consider it normal. The effect is similar to that of going into a bakery. When a person walks in the door, the odor of fresh baked goods is very noticeable. However, within a few minutes, the individual no longer notices the scent and so it is in a polluted space.

An effective strategy for enhancing the air quality of a space is the use of plants. Research by NASA indicates that the following types of plants are extremely effective enhancers of air quality: spider plants, golden pothos, peace lily and Chinese evergreen. An average size room may require 10 to 15 plants for the air to be enriched.

Learning, color, and music — The room's color affects learning. For example, chartreuse, light green and aqua are excellent colors for a room in which concentration and relaxation will be taking place. Studies of learning indicate that it is greatly enhanced in the calm state. Music can be employed in a space to enhance learning. Music affects the brain in two ways. First of all, it stimulates a relaxed state. Music affects the mid-brain which controls emotional experiences, and the listener's level of relaxation. Music also acts to trigger memory. For example, when a person hears a song that was first experienced during a happy occasion. The person will re-experience the earlier emotional state. Secondly, music stimulates the corpus callosum which links the right and left brain. Activating this link causes the two hemispheres to work in unity. Robert Monroe employs different tones to create a mental state called, *hemisync*. Hemisync is a state in which the two hemispheres of the brain operate in harmony and alignment. This state of mind presents an optimal state for intuitive flashes because the left brain is presenting analyzed information to the creative right. The likely result is learning which is grounded in both reason and intuition.

Creating a learning room

The information just discussed is the basic knowledge required for beginning a design for a physical environment that supports thinking.

1. Controlled space — Creating a learning room begins with locating a space that is private and allows the individual or group to control outside forces which may interfere. These forces can be controlled by informing others of your activities, unplugging the phones, using music as a buffer or using acoustical ceiling tiles and wall panels.

2. Taking inventory and visioning the perfect room — The second step involves taking inventory of the existing characteristics of the space, and designing a desired future state for it. A desired future state represents what you will transform the room into. The desired future state should include changes which enhance air quality and coloring, and allows for the use of music.

The space should be beautiful and enriching. Maslow and Minitz found in their study of the effects of beautiful versus ugly rooms that the nature of the room did affect the states of being of their study participants. People in the beautiful room experienced feelings of comfort, pleasure, enjoyment, energy, and the desire to continue being in the room performing required activities. Persons performing their activities in the ugly room tended to experience a sense of monotony, low energy, irritability, and a desire to discontinue the activities. A beautiful room will draw the person to it and encourage the performance of training activities. It will also induce a positive mental state that will refresh the person.

A simple method for evaluating a desired future state is to use a ten-point scale. The number one represents the statement, "I'd rather die than go into that room." The statement associated with number five should be something like, "I'll go into the room. However, I'd rather do something else." The ten response is the experience of wanting to create in the room now, of being in love with the beauty of the space and to really enjoy being there. Using this as a measure, you know when you're beginning to feel dissatisfied with the room and need to reflect on possible changes. In fact, changes in the environment should be made to stimulate new thoughts.

Ambiance... The comfort of the furniture should be considered. Most chairs are not designed to support learning.

The result is that people become lifeless, bored and uncomfortable, thereby causing a reduction in their desire and ability to learn. Trainers should inform participants of the relationship between physical comfort and learning. He or she could ask participants if they wish to sit on the floor or stand at times. Physical exercises can and should be employed during long sessions to enhance the flow of physical energy. The availability of natural light and relative humidity should also be considered. Sunlight has been associated with positive moods. A person in such a state will find it much easier to move into a calm state of mind. Humidity should also be examined. High relative humidity tends to be associated with feeling low. The ideal room temperature is between 70 and 73 degrees F. The relative humidity associated with this range is between 60 to 70 percent. The temperature and humidity should be steady, not fluctuating.

3. Evaluating and planning the room — The next step in the design process is to compare the existing state with the desired future. This can be performed by using a comparative listing of the two states, by drawing a floor plan, and visualizing the desired future state compared to the present reality of the room. Differences should be noted, and a plan of action developed for creating the desired future state. The plan of action can be either a floor plan or a model. A floor plan is better suited for individuals who are visual in their information processing. A kinesthetic person will find a model of greater benefit because of their need to feel something during their creative process. The plan should also present a prioritized list of activities to be performed, completion dates, and the costs associated with an activity. This can be done by hand or by a computer, if a person has a project management program and a graphics program allowing for floor plan design.

Additional benefits possible — The creation of a learning room or space can provide other benefits beyond improved learning. For example, it can be employed for the purpose of marketing training services within the company and even to the outside. Participants experiencing an enriched space will communicate their experience to others. Word-of-mouth selling is still the most effective form of marketing and is also cost effective for the training department. ♦