

Training Briefs

Maximizing Training with Small Groups

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Member training and development are shared responsibilities between AmeriCorps program staff, site supervisors, training coordinators, and trainers. **Training Briefs** are designed to provide these individuals with useful information and innovative ideas for member training and development.

Small groups provide big benefits during member training and development sessions (Take a look at last month's *Training Brief* #3: October 1997). When using small groups, be sure to consider group composition. In fact, overall training effectiveness depends on how groups are formed and used. Understanding the desired outcomes of the training with small groups is at least as important as the training topic itself — if not more so! What are the experiences, needs, and skill levels of your members? What are the needs and objectives of each training session, and how does each session fit into the program's overall training strategy?



Training Briefs are produced by MOSAICA, under Cooperative Agreement #CA95-15 with CNS. This **Training Brief** was written by Training Specialists Marilyn Noguera and Dan Balón, and designed by LaTosha Joseph. This material represents the opinion of MOSAICA, and does not necessarily represent official CNS policy.

To begin or stop receiving MOSAICA's **Training Briefs** by fax, or find out about training and other available assistance, contact: Diane Cabrales, Project Director, MOSAICA, 1000 16th Street, NW, Suite 604, Washington, DC, 20036, e-mail mosaica@ix.netcom.com, telephone (202) 887-0620, fax (202) 887-0812.

Trainers can group members randomly or purposefully. Purposeful grouping can be powerful as a tool to help build team within or across sites/assignments, break the ice or break up cliques, or offer experienced members a chance to take leadership roles and teach their peers. (For more information on assigning roles in small groups, read about Cooperative Learning in *Starting Strong*, p. 197. Purposeful grouping can be used to:

Strengthen "sense of team." Keep site teams together during training to build a sense of team within the teams, to plan for actual assignments, or to address group process. If the crews are larger than six people, consider forming smaller subgroups to divide tasks and increase participation.

Create cohesive identity across several sites. Mix members from different service sites to build team across service locations and to encourage them to see members outside their assignment or team as resources. This can help members in multi-site programs to identify with the entire program, not just their site or team. It helps facilitate that important esprit de corps!

Respond to diverse individual backgrounds or skills levels. Grouping members from the same project, skill level, life experience, or interest area is desirable when planning activities that require group members to have similar backgrounds or skill levels. For example, basic information on AmeriCorps during pre-service training is essential for new members but repetitious for second-year members. During the basic session, second-year members could receive a more advanced session on AmeriCorps, such as identifying and brainstorming on obstacles members face in complying with regulations.

Encourage teaching among members. Trainers can create variety within groups by mixing members from diverse project assignments, life experiences, project skill abilities, or motivation levels. Small diverse groups encourage a cooperative learning environment that recognizes teachers among your members. Keep in mind that small group learning through practicing by doing and teaching others leads to high rates of retention (see *Starting Strong*, p. 88).

MOSAICA now has a home—page, that is! Take a browse at our site at <http://www.mosaica.org>

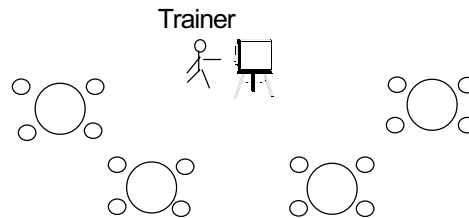


(cont.)

Keep participants energized. Trainers can retain or change small group composition as needed. Keep groups together when continuity is desired between activities in a training session, or when building a sense of team, such as with new AmeriCorps members during pre-service training. To energize participants, change group composition — especially after lunch or breaks! Group changes allow members to meet new faces, and become familiar with each other's skills, talents, personalities, and viewpoints. Regular regrouping can help prevent or break up cliques. This is especially useful in managing "difficult" personalities by sharing them among different small groups.

Room for Small Groups. Consider the following when choosing training space for activities that use small groups:

- ◆ **OPEN SPACE.** Secure training space large and open enough to allow small group seating with quick and easy movement.
- ◆ **WALL SPACE.** Ensure sufficient wall space for hanging newsprint created by small groups during activities. Displaying group "efforts" creates a sense of achievement.
- ◆ **WORK AREAS.** Create a room arrangement (e.g., circular or square tables and movable chairs) that enables members to work comfortably and without disturbing other groups. (See diagram below.)



Activity: The Values Continuum

Purposes:

To energize members, while quickly assessing their knowledge, skills, or attitudes regarding a particular training topic. To divide members into diverse small groups before a planned activity session. To encourage teambuilding among members in your training session.

Instructions:

Explain that an open space in the front or back of the room is like a continuum with "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" at opposite ends. Make a series of 4-5 statements related to various topics (e.g., "I like spicy food" or "I am an experienced trainer"). Ask members to stand at a place along the continuum that represents their level of knowledge, skill, or interest pertaining to each statement. Encourage conversations among participants so members may assess their positions in relation to others. Once members are lined up in the continuum, the trainer can assess the group and individuals with regard to a number of issues.

For your last continuum, consider the upcoming training topic and create an appropriate statement. For example, make the statement, "I know how to build a house," to see which members have experience with construction and which are novices. Have members count off based on the desired number of groups (e.g., counting off "1-5" will yield five groups), starting at one end of the continuum. Using the example above, this will ensure that each group has members with differing skill levels of construction.

Variation:

Use the Values Continuum to discuss more controversial topics, to encourage staff development, or to provide an assessment of participants' needs or interests. Consider relevant questions for your particular program sites, problem issues, and program goals. Make sure that you build upon comfort levels, beginning with less risky statements that promote confidence and safe sharing within the group. Then, once you sense appropriate comfort, use more challenging statements. As a wrap-up, ask members to share their viewpoints through discussion.

Need help?

MOSAICA provides telephone technical assistance free of charge to all CNS-funded programs on their training concerns. Call Diane Cabrales or Dan Balón at (888) 409-2600.



A Useful Resource

MOSAICA developed *Starting Strong: A Guide to Pre-Service Training* to help AmeriCorps programs plan and deliver effective pre-service training. Its user-friendly approach is perfect for staff with limited training experience. The manual explains in detail how to design effective training and provides over 35 sample training activities (also provided on disk) that can be easily modified to reflect program needs.

Request a copy from NSRC at ETR. Contact Jennifer Ryan by e-mail at jennifer@etr-associates.org or fax at (408) 438-3618.

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The HUM Game

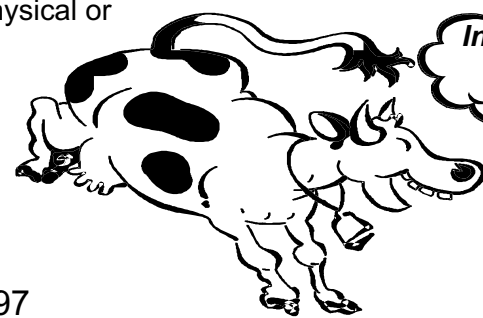
Prepare a card for each member with the name of a well-known song (e.g., "The Star Spangled Banner," "We Are the World," etc.) written on it ahead of time. You will need as many cards as members, and as many different song titles as desired groups. For example, if you have twenty members and want to break them into five groups of four, you will need five different song titles, each written on 4 cards.

Hand out the cards, being sure to give every member at the same table a title card. Ask everyone to stand, circulate, and hum the song on her/his listening for other members humming the same song. The goal of the exercise is to have all members humming the same song form a group. They cannot talk during member cannot hum, s/he can listen for and join those who are humming them to stand with their new group members. Once the groups are completely formed, ask each group to hum their song in turn. (This usually produces laughter.) After all the songs have been heard, ask the new groups to chose a table and sit down together.



different song card while listen-
the humming. If a
her/his song. Ask

Variations: Instead of songs, have members organize by animal sounds (e.g., duck "quack," cow "moo," sheep "baaa," etc.), physical actions (e.g., salutes, handclaps, etc.), human emotions (e.g., sadness, excited, clueless, etc.), or whatever types of groups imaginable. As with planning any activity, always keep in mind the needs of any individuals with physical or learning challenges.



Interactive training is both effective and fun!

MOSAICA thanks the participants of its May '97 training in Phoenix for contributing the examples below!

1-2-3-4-5

Number the tables in your training room. Write the numbers on small pieces of paper with enough numbers for everyone, and with the same numbers repeated the number of times needed to yield the desired group size (e.g., for five groups of six, use numbers "one" through "five" with six of each number). Put numbers in a hat and pass it around, asking every participant to take a piece of paper. Ask members to sit at the table with those with the same number as the one on their own pieces of paper. Everyone who randomly picked the same number will sit together in a new small group.



Colored Dots

Put different colored dots on participants' name tags or in their training packets. As they enter the training room, ask them to sit in small groups at a table with people who have the same color dots. This allows you to purposefully create the small groups before training starts. Consider "purposeful" grouping if you already know participants or you have information about them from pre-training questionnaires.

Candy

Prepare a bag of candy in advance (M&Ms work well!). The candy in the bag will depend on the size and numbers of small groups you need for your training session. For instance, if you have 35 participants and you want no more than five people in a group, you will need seven different types or colors of candy, and will need five pieces of each. Have members select a piece of candy, making sure they don't eat it. Those who received the same type or color of candy will sit together in a small group.

Variation: Consider a "change-up" once members know this activity and conspire to choose the same type of candy as their friends. Like above, have members select a piece of candy, making sure they don't eat it. This time, ask members to form groups that have all the types or colors of candy.

