

Chapter 5

MAKING THE TEAM A WINNER

Part 1: Training

When I think of training, I think of C.C. Edwards. Coach Edwards drilled the basics into me when I was playing college tennis. At the beginning of each season the fellows were eager to get out and hit the ball. We wanted to play matches and challenge for position. The coach, however, had a predetermined sequence of drills that he supervised prior to court competition.

We would stroke forehand to forehand; backhand to backhand; and backhand to forehand. Each day every player would serve a bushel of balls toward two marked spots on the court. Footwork and position, net and volley, lob and smash were all methodically practiced.

Although we only had one all conference player on our team of ten, we beat most of the schools in our conference. The reason? Coach Edwards believed in training. He was committed to making us the best we could be with the talent that we had.

We have all heard the expression, “If something is worth doing, it is worth doing well.” I cannot think of any more worthy of a task than the job of teaching people about God and His expressed will. Two things are eternal: God’s Word and people. The greatest opportunity we will ever have is the building God’s Word into people. Because of the greatness of our task, the maximizing of teacher skill is critical to our mission.

Why is training important?

If we truly believe that the Bible reveals God's only way of salvation, and that it contains His expressed principles for living, then teachers must do their best to communicate those eternal and life-changing truths. Teacher development, therefore, is essential; it is beneficial in three ways:

1. Teacher training equips the student. The better a teacher is able to communicate and motivate, the more deeply his/her students will understand God's Word.
2. Teacher training encourages the teacher. Teaching can have its frustrating moments, but it can also be a lot of fun. The individual who learns how to speak at the students' level, how to maintain classroom control, and how to use a variety of teaching methods will usually enjoy his/her classroom experience. Teachers who apply the skills learned in training sessions are less frequently discouraged and more confident in their ability to teach.
3. Teacher training strengthens the congregation as a whole. The very existence of training opportunities implies that we are all people in process. None of us is a finished product. A new volunteer can be assured of help with teaching basics. And the experienced teacher can be offered enrichment opportunities for further development. Training opportunities demonstrate to the congregation that we all need to improve our serving skills.

How do educational workers respond to training opportunities?

Where a church has never given much emphasis to training, the beginning of a systematic teacher training program will be met with mixed reactions. Some of your newer teachers, or perhaps those who are younger in the faith, will be glad to have someone give them help. A teacher who has been teaching for many years may be less open to suggestions or to changing what he/she has been doing.

A church should aim at having an ongoing training program. Once this practice is established, time will make it as routine as the Sunday morning sermon or offering.

In an earlier chapter we mentioned the importance of job descriptions and teaching contracts. These ministry descriptions should state that teachers are required to participate in departmental training, and are encouraged to share in other opportunities. When the requirements are stated up front, teachers are more likely to fulfill their agreed upon commitment.

Should program directors require regular meetings for their volunteers?

Regular meetings are beneficial in several ways.

1. They are great for team building. They remind the teachers that they are not working alone, but are part of a team ministry of discipleship.
2. They provide an opportunity for the ministry team to pray together, jointly asking God to use their service and touch the lives of students.
3. They give teachers a set time for planning, to insure that each person knows his/her responsibility for the coming lessons.
4. They include time for teachers to share their concerns and receive suggestions from one another.

All of our people are very busy. How can I expect them to give time for training?

This question accurately portrays American life. People find it increasingly difficult to juggle work, family and other commitments. Today, even retired grandmothers have too many things on their “to do lists.” But rather than just acquiescing to this situation, let’s reasonably challenge it.

In our own mind, and in the minds of our teachers, we need to continually lift up the high calling of teaching. When we consider the temporal and the eternal, we realize that there is no greater task than sharing the eternal Word with people who have an eternal future. We must expect all of our leaders to pursue training. If we do not have that expectation, many of them will not either.

Making training available to everybody will require that we become more flexible in our approach. Major training opportunities, such as a Sunday School convention or an in service event, should be planned well in advance. People can then put these dates on their calendars. Frequent, enthusiastic reminders will help keep these opportunities fresh in their minds. In spite of these reminders, however, most churches find that individual schedules do not permit complete attendance at big events. Therefore, large group training sessions should be kept to a minimum.

Ongoing department training with 100% participation expectations, however, can be conducted on a regular basis. These program specific and age-group stratified meetings require far less coordination of peoples’ schedules. A team of three to five workers can almost always find a time to meet together once a month.

These monthly or bimonthly team meetings can be schedule from month to month. However, some leaders prefer to establish a consistent meeting time for the entire year. For example, the first and second grade Sunday School team may choose the first Tuesday of each month, while the Boys Brigade leaders may desire to meet for an hour after their last monthly club night. Advanced, regular and consistent scheduling emphasizes the importance of our mission and task, and will help teachers make training a priority in their schedules.

What percentage of our staff can we expect to pursue training?

We should expect one hundred percent of our staff to pursue training! Some will be enthusiastic, some will be ambivalent and some may be resistant or absent. Nevertheless, we must expect all of our teachers to be open to the Lord’s refining of their gifts and abilities.

If a teacher demonstrates a lack of interest in improving his skills, then he/she should give serious consideration to not renew his/her teaching assignment next year.

What can our workers do on their own to improve their teaching?

Several possibilities exist for teachers to engage in personal development. These particular means allow teachers to learn on their own time, at their own pace and within their own environment.

1. *Reading.* Reading educational articles in Christian magazines or books on teaching can be very helpful. They motivate the teacher, give practical suggestions for the classroom, and also let the teachers know that they are not

alone in the learning process. Most publishing houses produce materials which focus on learner needs and the process of teaching. Teacher training cassettes, CDs and DVDs are also available on a variety of subjects, and are especially enjoyed by the person who prefers listening to reading.

2. *Observing.* Since people learn best through modeling, teachers can grow through the observing of classroom practices of other teachers. At least once or twice a year they should arrange for substitutes for their own classes, so that they can go observe in other settings. They may even choose to visit a good teacher in another church.

Most pastors and their colleagues are open to this type of inter church teacher development. They can open the door for program directors to meet the key leaders in other congregation. Through conversations with these leaders, and through personal visits, our directors can compile a list of competent teachers and good running programs that will prove instructive to our teachers.

3. *Sharing.* Teachers can learn much from discussions with other workers on how they prepare and interact with their students. They can also solicit student feedback, asking them of their concerns and how they learn best.

Is group training more profitable than individuals learning by themselves?

Some people enjoy the fellowship of a group; some prefer to spend their free moments alone. Some individuals like to do a job by themselves; others prefer the company of co-workers. In Christian education, both group training and individual learning are profitable. Here, however, are some benefits of group training:

1. Group training produces camaraderie among the participants. Individually we can learn the essential ingredients of a lesson plan, but when we study that procedure together, we have the by-product of growing together.
2. Group training coordinates efforts in team teaching. Teachers that work together benefit from planning and training as a group, since they function together in classroom activities.
3. Group teaching is time-efficient for the trainer. Many teachers can benefit from a new suggestion on preparation. Many share the same challenge of classroom management. The trainer's time is maximized when dealing with common problems with a larger group.
4. Group training softens constructive criticism. Some individuals are very sensitive to criticism, even positive suggestions that are offered. Suggestions made to a group are often less threatening to this type of person.
5. Group training makes possible the cross-pollination of ideas. The weight of instruction does not rest on the trainer alone, but is shared by all those present.
6. Group training heightens motivation and accountability. Some people just do not have the motivation to study on their own. These workers benefit from the accountability of a group and fixed schedule.

Christian education is very much an "attitude." We should, therefore, capitalize on every opportunity for team building, including opportunities for team development.

How important is it that our teachers attend outside workshops, seminars or Sunday School conventions?

While the monthly team meeting provides opportunity for program planning, the larger convention is known for infusing motivation. Educational seminars do offer teachers many practical how-tos, but perhaps of greater importance, they can give our workers personal encouragement and inspiration.

The department meeting lets teachers sense that they are part of a team. The community workshop broadens their concept of the size of the team. During the convention our Sunday School teachers and small group facilitators, will begin see themselves as part of a comprehensive network of leaders who are teaching God's Word throughout their community, their state, their nation and their world.

The speakers brought to these workshops have demonstrated sound teaching practice. Therefore, in addition to what they say, they typically model attitudes, values and behaviors that can rub off on our workers. While an expert may say the same thing that we have told our people, it is good for them to hear that message from another reputable source.

Should the church subsidize the expense for training, or should teachers pay their own expenses?

When I first began working as a Discipleship Pastor, our church could not afford to subsidize the training of teachers. I simply encouraged teachers to come with me to various training opportunities at their own expense. The cost of the Sunday School conventions was nominal, but the cost of seminars was prohibitive to some.

As our church grew larger, we were able to place into the Christian education budget money for teacher training. We then moved to the other extreme of completely reimbursing people for their conference expenses. We felt that if people were willing to take a day off from work, or give up a Saturday for training, they should not also have to pay for that commitment. Interestingly, however, when we paid the full fee, our "no show" rates at the seminars began to increase. After two years we began to realize that when people make a personal commitment of funds, they are more likely follow through on their attendance.

I believe the best arrangement is to solicit from your workers a non-refundable registration fee for the conference. The church should then pay any additional cost for the teacher to attend the seminar. In a seminar that cost \$40, for example, the sponsoring organization may charge a \$10 registration fee. The church could allow the teacher to pay the \$10 fee (or perhaps even charge them \$20) with the balance paid by the church. Because the teacher has made a personal investment, he or she will be more likely to attend the seminar. If the person does not show up for the seminar, most organizations refund all but the registration fee. In this way the individual is out his or her registration fee, but the church is protected from losing its money.

Should we bring in an outside resource person for an on-campus training event?

The outside expert coming to your church provides many of the same benefits derived from the convention speaker. The right guest will be both instructive and a good role model for your teachers.

If an evening event is desired, you could have a general session with the speaker from 7 p.m. to 7:50 p.m., a twenty minute coffee break, and then three elective topics from 8:10 p.m. to 9 p.m. The resource person could lead one of the electives. A Saturday seminar might include two sessions in the morning, team meetings after lunch, and a concluding, general session from 2:15 p.m. to 3 p.m.

Most churches believe it is inappropriate to charge their people for in-house training. In order to get the most out of your budgeted dollars, therefore, invite the best speakers you can within your geographical location. This allows you to use your money for worthy honoraria by keeping travel expenses to a minimum.

What themes and skill sets should we include in our teacher training?

Most leaders believe that a teacher's *person* is more important than the teacher's *presentation*. Paul told the Colossians that he labored with all the energy that God supplied so that he could present people mature in Christ. With continued exposure, students pick up many of the attitudes, values, and even mannerisms of a respected teacher. Therefore, anything that helps a teacher become more like Jesus Christ is a valid ingredient for teacher training. But we don't have to stop here. In addition to character teachers can also grow in their teaching practices.

For effective teacher preparation and presentation, training should be provided in the following areas:

- A study of how learning takes place.
- Characteristics of the learner.
- Spiritual disciplines for the teacher.
- Understanding and utilizing teacher materials.
- An overview of teaching methods.
- The importance of application.
- Assessment of the teaching-learning process.

The most practical training for a teacher is that which most applies to his/her program. Sunday School teachers will benefit from the planning session suggestions in their teacher's manuals. Children's club workers can study their training manuals to understand how each session should function.

General works on training can also be used to help teachers understand all parts of their jobs from preparation to presentation. Resources for training abound. You can visit your local bookstore to review products. You may also want to contact a professor from the Christian education department of a local college or seminary for his/her recommendations.

How can I help my teachers become more confident?

Teaching confidence is related to five factors:

1. Understanding the learners. The better teachers know the characteristics and needs of their students, the more responsive the class will be to their instruction. Student responsiveness, in turn, builds teacher confidence.
2. Knowing the subject matter. Teachers must be convinced that they have made a thorough study of the text and have prepared their lessons. When they have studied well, they know that they can speak with confidence.
3. Orchestrating the teaching-learning process. Talking is not teaching. But through the use of appropriate involvement methodologies, teachers can help students learn. Teachers' confidence will grow as they see learners make personal application of the lesson.
4. Assessing the teaching-learning process. Assessment helps teachers determine how close they are to their targets. By stating outcomes and assessing how close they were reached, teachers can evaluate their progress. Whether teachers use self-evaluation forms, listen to tapes of their own sessions or invite an observer to sit in on their lesson, they will grow in confidence through evaluation.
5. Believing in the sovereignty of God. When teachers believe that they alone are responsible for their student's spiritual health, they place undue pressure on themselves. They will never feel good about themselves if they believe their lessons have to be perfect. Teachers must simply present the Scriptures to their students in a challenging way, and then trust God with the results.

Summary

When I visited my friend who coached the Vermont Reds, each afternoon we would leave for the ball field three hours before the game. Jack would pitch batting practice. Other coaches and captains would supervise the outfielders, pitchers and infield practice.

These young men were better than average athletes. Obviously, they would not have made it into professional baseball without talent. If the Reds were to go on to win the AA title, however, they had to develop their skills to peak performance. Two months after our visit to Vermont, the Reds did win their World Series. What contributed to their success?—their dedication to training.

If something is worth doing, it is worth doing well! Is it worthwhile to teach people the Scriptures? Most certainly! The time, energy and finances necessary to do a superior job of training the Lord's teachers are investments well directed.

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