

# Train Your Trainers And Thrive

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## Best Practices: Prepare your trainers to succeed, and your business will, too.



We all understand the value of personal training, but there is no denying that too many consumers have had bad experiences or have developed misconceptions about what we do. Trainers fail; their businesses go bust. Why does it happen? How can it be avoided?

From my experience, it all comes down to how well we train our trainers. The key is to create a model where every employee—from day 1—works from a blueprint that clearly communicates what is expected of a team member. After all, even an experienced trainer may have trouble succeeding in a new environment if there is no guidance on the business's culture, training philosophies and management expectations.

"It is up to us to set [trainers] up for success," say Julie Wilcox, general manager of Fitness Quest 10 in San Diego. "If they don't understand our expectations regarding culture, protocols and professionalism, how can we expect them to succeed?"

## Training Your Trainers

The key to developing a successful personal training business is to develop a team of committed professionals. This is achieved by investing time and money in creating a comprehensive training program built on three fundamentals:

- knowing exactly what you expect from your team
- making those expectations clear
- giving your people the tools to succeed

At our personal training facility, One on One in State College, Pennsylvania, we train new team members for 4–6 weeks in a program called "One on One University." We recover the cost of this training in a number of ways, most relating to reduced employee turnover. Our team members know what is expected and have been taught how to meet those expectations. They have "bought into" the process and are most often quite successful. A comprehensive training program offers these additional benefits:

- **It Develops a Cohesive Team.** All team members participate in our training program. Having current staff members involved shows that they believe in the process and helps foster supportive rather than competitive relationships. It also creates a sense of gratitude and teamwork—the keys to maintaining a healthy corporate culture.
- **It Leads to Consistency in Service.** Most of our clients have two trainers working with them. This necessitates consistent, well-understood training methodologies and teamwork. While all trainers have their own unique style and delivery, they must work within parameters outlined in the training program. They work hard for the client, but also for their partner trainer.
- **It Emphasizes the Need for a "Corporate" Relationship With Clients.** Our training program teaches team members how to avoid getting into what we call the "buddy zone." Our clients are here to have a professional experience and get the best results from their programs. It is important to be personable, engaging and enthusiastic, but team members must work to foster a strong relationship with the business, not themselves. They come to understand the value of this during their training. As a result, clients have little problem working with other team members during vacations or when a change of schedule is necessary.
- **It Mitigates the Damage of Constant Turnover.** When a trainer is dismissed or quits, it always creates disruption. It is especially challenging when the individual is actually a good personal trainer but a lousy employee. The clients don't understand and can sour on you and your business. A training

program gives the new team member the tools to succeed, and you have the chance to find out if the individual is a good fit for your culture.

- **It Enhances Quality Control.** Your trainers are taught to do excellent work by your standards, not someone else's. Good trainers don't always know how high the bar can be raised. Keeping satisfied clients is far more important than recruiting new ones. They will stay satisfied only if they are having the highest quality experience, and when they do, they will send you referrals. Our clients have been with us an average of just under 5 years.

## Getting Started

When hiring new team members, look for people whose values seem consistent with yours. "Passion and energy are the first things we look for," says Wilcox. "Who they are as a person is essential and as important as what they know." With a comprehensive training program, you can teach a high-quality, motivated individual how to be a high-quality personal trainer.

Once you have found a good person for your team, it is critical to create the right foundation from the beginning. We draft a Memo of Understanding with all potential team members prior to making a commitment to them. It outlines the challenges of the position, compensation, benefits and our expectations of all team members. We want them to know exactly what is expected, and to have a reference if they don't keep up their end of the bargain. Make every effort to avoid having new staff members say, "I didn't know about that," once they are on the payroll. It is hard to say you are unclear on an issue if it is spelled out in black and white.

## Training the New Team Member

To effectively train a new team member, you must first define your expectations in detail. After all, you can't teach something you aren't clear on yourself. A comprehensive policy and procedure manual and written, well-defined cultural principles are a good start. I am amazed at the number of businesses that try to operate by the seat of their pants and wonder why it is such a struggle. Define your expectations and commit them to paper.

Having a well-defined outline of your training program is also a must. Precedent setting is extremely important with new hires (and clients, for that matter). If you are not organized and prepared, as a professional should be, you are sending the wrong message from the beginning. Your corporate walk should be no different from what you expect from the rest of the team.

How you structure your training program is up to you, but here are a few things we do at One on One:

- **Focus on Professionalism.** Nothing is more important. Leave nothing to chance. Review everything, from how your people introduce themselves to how they speak and interact. You must teach them why it is so important to avoid the "buddy zone." Some trainers may balk at having you suggest how they speak and interact with your clients, but this should already have been dealt with in the interview process and Memo of Understanding. Good people are not always a good fit for you and your culture.
- **Get Staff Involved.** This works magic. All current team members are involved in our training. They have been through it themselves and know the challenges the new trainer is experiencing. Just as they were mentored and taught when they first started, they are eager to give away what they have been given. It is a great example of our culture and creates a really wonderful team dynamic.
- **Review Training Philosophies, Principles and Protocols.** This is the easiest part of the process. All personal trainers like to learn and talk about training!
- **Focus on the "Art" of Training.** Good personal trainers are always motivated to learn new exercises and protocols, but many spend too little time on delivery. Purposeful cuing, subtle motivational techniques and effective communication are a few of the areas we focus on.
- **Emphasize practice and observation.** It is important to make each observation purposeful by having a specific objective. After each practice session, have the trainee complete a written critical analysis of her performance during the session and have the trainer she practiced with do the same. Then have them review their analyses together. The importance of taking the time to do this can't be overstated. Unstructured observation loses its value in a very short amount of time.

- **Review Policies and Procedures in Detail.** Ask the new team member if he understands why each policy exists and if he can be counted on to follow company procedures. You must get buy-in.

While all these points are important, our focus is clearly on professionalism and the art of training: these account for half of our program.

Our training program requires a significant commitment of time, effort and money. But when we contrast all of that with the cost of recruiting, turnover, disenchanted clients and aggravation, deciding to make the investment becomes pretty easy. Developing a committed, competent team will allow you to build a business that will continue to thrive long after you are gone.



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