

Experience Sharing Training Exercise
Wally Bock

I've used the following exercise in training for more than 25 years, modifying as I went. It's excellent for getting people to share and analyze their experience in a particular area.

I developed the exercise primarily to help participants identify what a great working environment is like. It's the first exercise we do in most leadership/management/supervision training. I'm sharing the supervision version here.

Once we have our description of a great working environment, we use it as the framework for all the other training. As we work through different skillsets, I will ask, "Look at our list of what makes a great working environment. How will these tools help you create one?"

Warning: This exercise will not work for you if you need to be in control. Every group will produce slightly different results and you have to be both willing and able to modify what you do to meet the needs and use the language of the group.

Time needed: 45 to 90 minutes

Whole Group: My **opening** is something like the following.

"Is there anyone here who has never had a boss? [pause for the usual smart remarks]

Great. That means you're all qualified to teach the rest of us something. I hereby declare thee 'Adjunct Faculty.' And it's time for us all to get to work.

In the next [time frame] we're going to use our experience as [workers, police officers, followers, etc] to create a definition of a great working environment. Here we go.

Please identify a time when it was great to come to work. Make notes if you want to. We're going to discover what our experiences have in common"

Diads. The next step is to get them to discuss with one other person. I want them to choose a person who is not a friend or colleague. If necessary, I will assert "trainer authority." I've told them in my intro that I am the one responsible for making sure we cover important material and stay on time, therefore, I am the final authority.

I give them about five minutes each to tell their partner why the situation they identified was one where it was great to come to work.

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Small Groups. I want them in groups of four to six. Their assignment will be to list six characteristics of a great working environment. I came to that number over the years. It seems to be big enough to get groups past the obvious low-hanging fruit but small enough that it's not unreasonable. It's also a number that may require them to combine characteristics, which is great for discussion.

I allow twenty minutes for this part of the exercise. I tell them that they will need to have someone taking notes and someone who will report their list to the whole group when we re-join.

Whole Group. It's debriefing time. I like going from small group to small group asking them for one thing they came up with that they haven't heard yet. Most of my training group sizes are small enough that this will work.

Each contribution should include some details of what they mean, why they chose the wording they did, etc. I make notes on a flip chart. Questions can be asked at any time.

After each report, I ask: "Do any other groups have something similar?"

When that discussion is done, we move on to the next group. In most of my trainings, this takes fifteen to twenty minutes but it can extend to half an hour or more. We usually wind up with eight to ten characteristics, but I've had as many as fourteen.

Sometimes I need to re-write the flip chart during the break. If I do that, my first question after we come back is: "Did I get it right?"

Several things can happen next. Sometimes I start with "Does anything on our list surprise you?" It rarely does, but when it does we can get into a great discussion.

Sometimes I present the findings of the research on great working environments. I only do that in groups that I know expect it to check against their input. Engineers and academics and CEO are three groups that want a presentation of research findings.

I try not to make a presentation because when I'm talking the learning slows down. So I try to make do with support material they can read on their own. I hand this out at the end of the day or the session or put it on the web site for the class.