Using Stories, Anecdotes, and Metaphors to Make your GXP Training Come Alive

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“GXP Training Tips” provides ideas and suggestions associated with the planning, management, and execution of training programs for regulated industries.

Reader comments, questions, and suggestions are requested. Case studies illustrating training applications submitted by readers are most welcome. Please send your comments, questions, and suggestions to column coordinator David Markovitz at david@gmptrainingsystems.com or to coordinating editor Susan Haigney at shaigney@advanstar.com.

“A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS.”

As a consultant and trainer with over three decades experience in US Food and Drug Administration-regulated industries, I know that this proverb is true. I have seen numerous companies improve their communications with their employees by expressing ideas and concepts through stories and word pictures.

Likewise, effective training sessions are often filled with stories, anecdotes, and metaphors. These visualization techniques help people remember key points and help personnel better understand what can be complex issues and situations.

If you’ve ever attended a technical conference, convention, or symposium, you’ve likely encountered a presenter who is in love with his or her data. They use slides with tiny numbers and lots of them (both slides and numbers). They put these slides up on the screen for everyone to see and wait for the “oohs and aahs.” Usually the presenter is the only one oohing and aahing while the people in the audience are squinting trying to figure out what’s on the screen. These presentations often result in a forgettable experience. People rarely remember what was discussed in these boring sessions.

It’s too bad, since many of these presenters have good things to say. They just don’t know how to say them.

Face it, as training topics, GXP and related compliance components can be dry, dull, and boring. The content itself is just not exciting. So if we want people to learn and remember, it is our responsibility as trainers to make the content interesting and a memorable experience.

One proven way to make GXP topics interesting is by using stories, anecdotes, and metaphors. The following are three tips on how you can use stories, anecdotes, and metaphors to make your training sessions memorable and meaningful.
MAKE IT PERSONAL
When opening a GXP training session, I use a PowerPoint slide with a picture of me with my family. I point out that this is a picture of customers of the pharmaceutical and medical device industries. I take a prescription drug daily to help manage my cholesterol level because genetics has blessed me with a natural cholesterol level on the upper side of normal. I point out that my father, who just turned 90, has two artificial knees to help him stay ambulatory, and that my mother has a stent in one of her coronary arteries as well as an artificial knee and hip.

The message is that this is a personal business. What we do in our industry either saves lives or improves the quality of life. This sets the framework that what we will discuss in our training sessions is serious business. People you know depend on us to do our jobs properly all the time. Often I add another picture of little children. Who can resist the trusting smiles of children? And their lives are also affected by what we do. As parents we trust that the people who manufactured the drugs or medical devices we administer or use with our children did their job right all the time. This sets the tone for the training we are engaged in. It becomes personal.

CORRECTIVE ACTION AND PREVENTIVE ACTION
Here’s where one can use the metaphor of the fire department. Most people employed by the fire department are firefighters. They ride the red trucks with lights flashing and sirens blaring careening their way through traffic to put out a fire. There’s a lot of drama there—a lot of adrenaline coursing through the veins of the firefighters as they work to put out a fire.

But there are others employed by the fire department that don’t ride on the trucks and don’t wear the protective gear. They drive cars and carry clipboards. They conduct inspections of public facilities. Their responsibility is to help prevent fires. There is little drama and no adrenaline in this aspect of the fire department’s work.

Now if you’re a Hollywood film maker and want to make a movie about the fire department, who would you choose to base your story on? Of course all movies made about the fire department have featured the firefighters. That’s where the drama is.

But in FDA-regulated industries, we strive for little drama in operations. Smooth and consistent systems and processes are our aim. This is where the PA in CAPA comes in. Preventive action should be stressed. Sure, CA (corrective action) is necessary when things go wrong. But the more we invest in PA (preventive action), the less CA will be necessary. The aim is to build robust systems and processes.

Here’s where the drama builds, however. We fall into the loop of CA followed by CA followed by CA. The excuse or rationalization we give is that there is neither time nor enough resources available to do the PA. So our CAPA program becomes CA-CA-CA. This situation will certainly invite a warning letter from FDA. After all, this condition is frequently cited in FDA-issued warning letters.

One way to emphasize the importance of PA is to use the following abbreviation for corrective action and preventive action—caPA. Using caPA instead of CAPA sends the signal about the relative importance of preventive action to corrective action. Start using caPA in your company. It’s a good step in creating awareness that PA should be high on our list of priorities.

CHECKING AND DOUBLE CHECKING
Checking and double checking is a critically important aspect of GXP. The impact of a mistake, mix-up, or error can be monumental. Everyone knows how important checking and double checking can be. Here’s a tip on making it understandable and keeping the awareness level up.

In my trainings I often ask people if they have ever driven to work, pulled into a parking space, and have no memory of the trip in. Almost everyone raises their hand. At this time I usually say something like, “Aren’t you glad your car knows the way?”

So here’s the point. Driving a car is a skill that is fairly easily mastered, and for most of us, a skill we learned and mastered a while ago. Driving a car is a fairly routine, repetitive, redundant task. It really doesn’t require much thinking. Most of us navigate our way through city traffic every day without really paying close attention to what we’re doing.
Then I ask how many jobs or tasks in a company can be characterized as fairly routine, repetitive, and redundant. The answer—lots of them. These tasks or jobs are breeding grounds for complacency. Just as many traffic accidents are the result of complacency, many mix-ups and errors in our operations are the result of complacency.

Checking and double-checking is an effective tool to guard against complacency. Effective checking and double-checking require discipline. Many places in our documents require a second signature. This is independent verification, not just a second signature. The second signature is the double check. The person performing the double check (independent verification) must understand the importance of their role and the consequences if they do not perform this task accurately and thoroughly.

CREATE YOUR OWN STORIES, ANECDOTES, AND METAPHORS
You should be able to develop additional ways to use stories, anecdotes, and metaphors to make your GXP training come alive.

The objective in using these techniques is to create word pictures in the minds of the participants. These pictures stay with people long after the words are gone. GXP

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