



# Training and the “Mastery Loop”

By Pete Bottomley

Have you noticed that the word “training” has been watered down lately and confused with education? I see education as the first step, where we learn new ideas, and training as the second, where we practice and use what we have learned to improve our performance.

Training, in the purest sense, is a dynamic and continuing process. Through it, we can produce profound physical and psychological changes. Unlike a timed educational session, training continues as long as there’s room for improvement — that’s why I’m always training!

The “Mastery Loop” developed by Rex Sykes, an expert in the field of accelerated learning, shows the various learning phases we go through on our way to mastering a new skill:

**Approach.** The new idea is discovered. Example, “Acknowledging your customer is the first step to great customer service!”

**Bewilderment.** An effort is made to make sense of the information or concept. Examples: “Why do customers want to be acknowledged?” “Why do I want attention when I’m shopping?” “How do I act now with customers?”

**Clear Understanding** The individual grasps the information and has a clear understanding of it. Example: “Customers remember how they are treated above everything else.”

This is where most training stops. The concept is mastered at that moment in time, but there’s been no change in skill level. If there’s no further reinforcement, 90 percent of everything learned evaporates, and behavior will stay the same. Completing the Mastery Loop brings learners to successively higher levels of skill development.

## COMPLETE THE LOOP

So if mastering the skill isn’t enough, what is? When do you stop training on a skill? You don’t. You keep repeating the skill, learning more about it, maybe even inventing a better way to address that problem. The advanced stages of the Mastery Loop teach you how to do this.

**Drill.** Hands-on experience that allows the learned concepts to be used. Role-play ways to acknowledge customers in the following situations: 1) you’re spacing or watering plants: “Hi! I’ll be right with you.” 2) You’re talking with a co-worker: Stop talking with co-worker immediately. 3) You’re talking with another customer: Make eye contact with other customer and smile patiently. 4) You’re on the phone: Make eye contact as soon as possible, smile, gesture that you’ll only be a minute, or ask phone caller to hold.

**Enact.** The daily application of what has been learned. Consistent practice of the above role-plays with actual garden center customers. Example: Every movement triggers the thought, “Does someone need my attention?”

**Fuse.** The concepts and skills become habit. Example: Customers seek out this person because he/she is so attentive.

**Genius.** The individual begins to develop new applications for the concepts learned to bring about increased results and successes. Example: The person practices remembering the names of customers, which helps cement long-term relationships.

## KEEP IT GOING

Whether you’re training for a marathon, to speak a new language, merchandise more effectively or become a genius

## ACTION ZONE

“Acknowledge each and every customer” was the common thread discussed in all of the sessions on April 25, 2002. The team at Plants Unlimited in Rockport, Maine, pointed out that not all customers want help, and others might even be afraid to ask for help (because we look too busy). The primary goal at Plants Unlimited is to engage the customer — by approaching her, you acknowledge she’s there and open the door to start a conversation. Ignoring customers is the worst thing we can do.

It takes only a second or two to make a great or terrible impression. Here are the golden nuggets from this week’s sessions to help all of us make the most of those first few precious moments with a customer:

Market. It’s getting busy! Schafer Nursery in Bellingham, Mass., suggests that when it’s busy, it’s time to try harder. The reason: “Even though we’re tired and we’ve all had a long day, this is the time of year that we see the most amount of people and leave the biggest impression.”

Nugget — People will remember your smile more than anything else.

Teamwork. The notion of setting aside your own problems for the

benefit of the team was brought up at Laughton’s Garden Center, Chelmsford, Mass. “We admitted that the second we punch in, we belong to our employer, customer and each other.” They talked about the importance of leaving personal stresses at the door. With that in mind, they noted that there are many ways to say “Hi”:

- with a good or bad attitude;
- sincerely or sarcastically;
- upbeat or down; and
- real or superficial

The group at Laughton’s also recognized that “we are human and will make mistakes,” but being aware of how our attitude affects the impression we make goes a long way towards improving public relations.

Nugget — An upbeat voice sets a positive tone for any conversation.

Training. For Vinmy’s in E. Hartford, Conn., the team used role-plays to laugh, relax and unload the stress that’s starting to pile up during this busy season. Learning and laughing are not mutually exclusive, in fact, you probably learn more when you’re enjoying yourself.

Nugget — Humor relieves stress and opens communication.

at acknowledging customers, it’s helpful to think of real training as something that takes place all the way down at the cellular level. You have to work at your goal consistently and make lots of little changes before you start to see results. When a person starts to reap the rewards of training, a strange thing happens: he or she starts to really enjoy the training process and looks forward to it!

Here’s another way to look at it — training is the “educational maintenance” that puts new ideas into practice. Telling someone how to sell companion plants isn’t going to change their behavior. Now, just think what would happen if you asked that same person to organize a “companion plant bundle of the week” and present it to the rest of your team. WOW! It wouldn’t take long for the teacher to become the resident genius on bundling and for the rest of the crew to start understanding more about the bundling concept.

Training isn’t just about deliver-

ing educational events. It’s about each person using the new ideas learned to start their own deeply personal training program. As a trainer, your ultimate job is to act as the catalyst to spur someone to

make that choice to think and train on his or her own. 🌱

Pete Bottomley, JP Horizons’ director of training for the Lawn and Garden Retailer Training Challenge, is an ASTD

certified trainer and garden center consultant with 18 years of green industry experience. To learn more about the Training Challenge, or consulting services available through JP Horizons, E-mail [pete@jphorizons.com](mailto:pete@jphorizons.com) or call (877)

CHALLENGE  
CALENDAR

6

Number of participating  
garden centers

8 9

Average number  
of employees trained  
per week

3 0 – 3 1

Number of  
days you  
can train each month

July 16

Founders complete  
20th consecutive week

October 4

Truserv/Home & Garden  
Showplace Training Jam  
Dallas, Texas

November 5

CNLA Training Jam,  
Windsor, Conn.

May training topics:

“Merchandising Magic,”  
“Merchandising Tools,”  
“Dealing with Difficult  
People,” and