The Life of a Corporate Trainer

An Insider Tells All

Jonathan Halls
More Praise for This Book

“Jonathan Halls has revealed that the emperor has no clothes! As always, his experience, candor, and wit shine through as Halls unveils the truth behind what real learning professionals do, and don’t do, to accomplish their mission of helping people perform more effectively in the workplace.”
—Sharon Wingron, CPLP, President and Chief People Development Partner, DevelopPEOPLE

“In Confessions of a Corporate Trainer, Jonathan Halls practices what he preaches by helping readers actually learn how to increase training’s value. Unlike an ever-expanding number of titles on the topic of training, this book offers tips that are easy to apply, are proven to work, and allow for training-related conversations with senior leaders that are unlikely to make their eyes glaze over with talk of adult learning theory or the latest faddish buzzword.”
—Andrew Rath, PhD, CPLP, Institutional Effectiveness Department, National Intelligence University

“This book is for every corporate trainer who has been expected to follow the unwritten rules of the trade. Confessions of a Corporate Trainer is smart, funny, energetic, and gives trainers the permission to break out of the mold and use their expertise to facilitate more effectively!”
—Jennifer Linch, Assistant Director of Training and Development, American College of Education

“Jonathan Halls’s new book Confessions of a Corporate Trainer had me at hello! This book is filled with an abundance of vivid examples, stories, and experiences to increase and expand my confidence and competence as a L&D professional in the 21st century.”
—Nanci Appleman-Vassil, MA, NCC, BCC, CSP, Founder and CEO, APLS Group
“Finally, an instructor who actually demonstrates what he presents to the group as best practices. Jonathan’s fervor for training is as prevalent in the classroom as it is in *Confessions of a Corporate Trainer.*”
—Wayne P. St.Louis, CSM, USA retired, Lead Associate, Booz Allen Hamilton

“Jonathan Halls’ *Confessions of a Corporate Trainer* provides a real look at what corporate trainers should be focused on. It’s an inside look that will prompt thought and reflection and provide practical tips that help make anyone a better trainer.”
—Matthew Pierce, Learning and Video Ambassador, TechSmith Corporation

“After working with nearly 1,000 corporate trainers, I can attest that *Confessions of a Corporate Trainer* provides a vivid and authentic peek behind the curtain for the world of professional trainers. The stories within the book brought back many memories and Halls’s practical steps for continuous improvement are applicable for any trainer, regardless of experience.”
—Dean Griess, Director of Learning Delivery at a Financial Institution

“*Confessions of a Corporate Trainer* is an invaluable tool for anyone wanting to transform themselves from a professional trainer to a training professional. Jonathan Halls rips off the veil, exposing the guts of the training world and they are crystal clear.”
—Jeff Sinclair, Senior Manager of Training and Talent Development, Sunrun

“Jonathan’s look at the world of training is both entertaining and insightful. Filled with honest stories about what the life of a trainer is really like, this book shares practical advice on the true challenges of this field and how you can overcome them.”
—Bianca Woods, Senior Manager of Programming, The eLearning Guild

“I’ve spent nine years as an instructor and course designer in the military. *Confessions of a Corporate Trainer* highlights how Jonathan Halls is revolutionizing the process of delivering quality instruction and design.”
—Sean Lawler, CPO, U.S. Coast Guard
THE LIFE OF A CORPORATE TRAINER

AN INSIDER TELLS ALL

JONATHAN HALLS
For the people who have attended my train-the-trainer and advanced trainer programs over the past two decades. You have taught me much, shaped my practice, and are responsible for my success today.
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A few years ago, I was at an event for learning professionals, somewhere in North America. I won’t tell you where in case I incriminate myself. Not seeing anyone I knew, I joined a group near the drinks counter who were shooting the breeze about their work. In particular, how to deliver a good training session.

“You need to check the classroom the night before, to ensure tables are set up in the right order,” one guy said proudly. I later found out he’d been a trainer for just over six months. Another said, “It’s critical to arrange the tables in your room so there’s space for you to perform. I mean, a lot of training is acting, right?” He was one of those engaging types with a loud voice and everyone nodded their heads. “Oh, yeah,” a third chimed in, “the successful trainer needs to own the room.”

The conversation felt like deja vu. Because it could have been a word-for-word re-enactment of a conversation that I’d heard at another conference the month before. In fact, it’s a conversation I’ve heard many times around the globe. In Europe, the Middle East, and North America. At conferences or in staff meetings of training departments.
Universal Collective Set of Rules

Over my years of experience, I’ve come to notice a universal set of dos and don’ts that exists within the collective consciousness of the training profession. There’s no central repository where it’s written down but it’s like an oral constitution that somehow everyone knows. “Call participants before class for an informal needs analysis.” Or, “Check participants’ learning styles and adjust your instructional plan.” Then, “Never start a class late—it disrespects the folks who arrive on time.” And, “Dress one level above the participants.”

You won’t just hear trainers reciting these collective rules. The web is littered with blog posts that posit these rules under headings like “5 Things Awesome Trainers Do” or “Dos and Don’ts of Training.” But what if you can’t follow them? Or if you don’t want to?

For example, many trainers fly into a city at 7 p.m. the night before a class, after the facility is closed, and have no chance of checking the room they’ll be in. If the class is being held at a hotel, the room may be booked for an event that evening. And how about calling participants before class? Noble in theory unless you lead four classes a week with 20 participants. Does any trainer have time to call 80 people a week and talk for five minutes? In fact, do participants have time or even the desire to play along?

Universal rules often sound great in theory. In this case, some are fine but often they’re impractical. There is reason to question their utility from a learning perspective.

Too Much Pressure

I work with learning professionals around the globe in my train-the-trainer programs, professional development workshops, and coaching. And I get the sense many invest valuable time and energy trying to be the shiny happy trainer who follows the universal rules. Adhering to the
rules is a huge burden. Some feel that if they don’t follow these rules or techniques they’ll become a bad trainer. Others nurse a sense of guilt, worrying that if they don’t they’re committing professional malpractice. And those who intentionally ignore them because they think there’s a better way don’t have the guts to tell anyone because they’ll hear from peers, “Aww gee, you’re not supposed to do that.”

Well, I want to tell you something. It’s impossible to be a truly transformative trainer, who gets real results, while living up to this universal collective set of rules for training.

**A Book of Confessions**

This leads me to my first confession of many in this book. I break more of these universal training rules in my practice as a workplace learning professional than I follow. I do so carefully and deliberately, of course, making sure that breaking them is not unethical or unprofessional. I’ve discovered that the less I’m tied down by these unwritten rules, the more I feel free to truly help people learn. And interestingly, I’ve seen increased feedback scores because I’m focused on the learners, not on my performance as a trainer.

Many of the universal rules are more about how we as trainers perform than how we help learners build their skills and knowledge. I mean, who cares if there’s space at the front of the room for me to perform—it’s not meant to be my show, it’s the learners’. Who cares whether I dress one level above the learner or not—so long as I have a shower and don’t smell in the classroom or wear clothing that’s offensive, that should be alright.

Now some of this talk may be uncomfortable. I get that. If you’re a big fan of learning styles, and you read how much I think they’re misleading because of the research refuting them, that may be disconcerting. As you work your way through these pages, you may find that
while some things resonate, others make you sit back and think, “I don’t and can’t agree.” That’s fine! Diversity of ideas and seeing other perspectives is what leads to richer understanding. But I share my stories and questions respectfully, hoping they’ll encourage the work you do and give you the confidence to also question some of what you might be doing on automatic pilot and the assumptions you make about your work.

Throughout this book, and indeed in the title, I use the term trainer. You’ll recall that the industry has referred to the role of the trainer with different words over the years. Instructor, teacher, coach, facilitator, workplace learning professional, and talent specialist are just a few I can immediately recall. These words are helpful to our profession in understanding what we do, but to anyone outside the talent world, they don’t mean a whole lot. Use the term trainer, though, and most people get it. So, in this book I’m sticking to the term most people know, using it to mean facilitating, teaching, coaching, and anything else we do to help learners do the work of learning in today’s organizations.

While a lot of what I say is couched informally, sometimes with humor, everything I say is driven by a real passion for the work you and I as trainers do to help people and organizations. I truly believe it’s a noble thing to be a trainer. We help people do the work of making themselves more skillful and knowledgeable. These new or deeper skills and knowledge help organizations function better and create value for their stakeholders. In government, that value goes to citizens and community members through public services. In commercial organizations, the value goes to owners or shareholders whether they be an individual in Nebraska or a retirement fund supporting your grandparents in Florida. For nonprofit organizations, the value goes to people in need around the world, whether it’s helping to eradicate malaria in Angola or support microenterprises in Bangladesh businesses. Yes, what
we do is noble when exercised professionally and ethically. But with it comes an enormous privilege. When you facilitate a webinar, lead a face-to-face class, or create content such as a video or instructional podcast, learners open their minds and allow you to influence their thinking. This is awesome and as such requires us to do everything we can to be great trainers. That’s at the heart of this book.

**What’s in This Book**

What can you expect over following pages? I want to explore what it really means to be a successful trainer in all its gritty reality. Not to prepare you for the circle of conversation at a conference where trainers talk about the dos and don’ts of our work. But to support you, as a reflective practitioner, to continually deepen the learning experience for the people you serve as a trainer. How are we going to do it?

Leading off, I confess that no matter how well we plan a learning experience, its success is never really guaranteed. In chapter 1, I share a story about something that happened to me in Moscow.

To know which of the unwritten rules to break, we need a research-based understanding of learning in the workplace. Chapter 2 explores what that is.

Have you ever noticed that some of your best performances are when you aren't trying to perform? Chapter 3 covers the power of shifting your focus from how you perform to how the learner gets to practice.

While trainers work to help the organization, it’s the leaders of the organization who hire and fire us. Chapter 4 reviews what this means for our work, how we align it to the business, and how we handle the many conflicting priorities we face.

In many training departments, tension develops between instructional designers and trainers. It doesn’t have to be this way. Chapter 5 provides advice on how to leverage the richness this relationship brings.
It might just be me, but I find myself dumping my training plan once I’m on site as often as I end up following it. And I don’t think that’s a bad thing. Chapter 6 delves into why that may be good in your own practice.

Effective learning reaches way beyond the training room. It’s incumbent on us to ensure the learning extends from the classroom into the workplace and all its influences. Chapter 7 takes us through the jungle of the learning ecosystem.

What do you do when most people have only poor impressions of training? These lasting images mean we must also assume the mantle of ambassador for talent. Chapter 8 considers how we can solve this problem with stories.

Whether you’re in the classroom or in front of a computer screen all day, in the office, at home, or on the road, one critical topic we don’t talk enough about is energy management. Trainers juggle massive workloads and often feel like it’s impossible to keep up. Chapter 9 explores strategies to combat this.

If you are on the road a lot, it’s important to be honest about one aspect of a trainer’s life that many hate: travel. Chapter 10 offers ways to make travel and hotel stays less miserable.

Not unlike other fields, the training profession is full of hot air and buzzwords. Keeping current can be confusing because every year there’s a new wave of enthusiasm about something different. Chapter 11 proposes turning to learning science, with a critical eye, to stay on top.

The future changes more rapidly every year, and this will continue to have a big impact on trainers. Chapter 12 looks at the key skills we need to stay competitive in the world of artificial intelligence, robots, and other uncertainties.
I delivered my first ever training session in 1987. It was a six-part class on broadcasting at the local public radio station where I volunteered at as a kid. I was still in high school. You could say I started writing this book back then, when I discovered how to share learning with a small group of radio enthusiasts. I’ve been gathering material for this book through my work as a media trainer, learning executive, leadership trainer, small training business owner, and university student. It’s 30 years in the making.

For this book, I decided to share stories about my life as a trainer. But I’m not the only one with interesting experiences. I’m honored that some trainers I hold in high regard have agreed to write sidebars about challenges they’ve faced as trainers and how they overcame them. You may recognize some of their names—many have written books about training sitting on your bookshelf. Others are tireless workers in organizations where they work to help people. Thanks to my good friend, Elaine Biech, whose very long list of books has influenced our profession for decades. And authors Lou Russell, Halelly Azulay, and Cindy Huggett, all thought leaders in our profession. And thanks Wesley
Anderson—a reflective practitioner who always makes me think. I’m touched and grateful that these folks have shared their stories. It goes without saying that the fact they were kind enough to do so does not imply they necessarily agree with everything I’ve written in this book.

Above all, what I hope is that as you read, you’ll find similarities or familiar threads in our stories with your own. After all, trainers go through similar ups and downs whether you work for an insurance company or on the factory floor.

In addition, a lot of people knowingly and unknowingly contributed to this book. The late Alex Vale inspired me to pursue adult education, which makes me one of the unusual folks who is not an accidental trainer. Alex’s influence helped me see my future work back in the late 1980s. Mike Newman was a professor at the college where I got my adult education degrees in the 1990s. He demonstrated through his practice what facilitating learning was really about, inspiring a fascination for Paulo Freire. At the BBC, Charmaine De Souza, who took a big risk in hiring this unknown broadcast trainer from Australia, modeled professional training management and how to align training to business goals. And the trainers I worked with at the BBC—wow—I’m still awestruck by their skills and professionalism. And the late Madeline Finnerty was a wise collaborator, too, who influenced a lot of my thinking.

The folks who run ATD’s Education Department have also been an important part of my professional development over the years. Linda David, Courtney Vital, Elizabeth Hannah, Alicia Cipriani, Vanessa Fludd, Shana Campbell, Eliza Auckerman, and Bettina Wolf. I know I’ve forgotten some—forgive me. But thank you friends. And there’s a list too long to publish who also taught me an incredible amount of stuff about training and about myself. These are the folks who have attended workshops I have facilitated around the globe. I consider you all my teachers. Some of these folks as well as a number
of clients pop up throughout the book. However, in a small number of circumstances, I have changed names, geography, and other identifying details to protect their privacy.

But it’s not just training folks who helped me write this book. I couldn’t have done any of this without the support of my favorite person in the world: my wife, Sharon. She’s the one who puts up with me being grumpy when it takes me longer than I plan to write a chapter. Who doesn’t make any snarky comment when I bring my manuscript on vacation to work on, even though I promised I wouldn’t work. And doesn’t put demands on me when I cloister myself in my office to pound the keys on my keyboard. That big smile and encouraging manner is the fuel that enables me to complete the task.

Finally, I want to send a shout out to the ATD book folks who let this project go ahead. It started, like two of my books, over lunch with Justin Brusino. We both like burgers and French fries. “Do you have another book in you?” he asked. “Yeah, but you won’t publish it.” “Why not?” “Because it’s going to be written in first person and I want some space to poke fun at the profession.” “Try me,” he said. He was either courageous or sleep deprived, tending to his young son, because he said, “Let’s give it a shot.” This is probably a risky book for ATD Press because it’s not in their normal mold. It’s not an instructional volume like much in their catalogue. They let me be a little wild. So, thanks ATD for your faith in me. Amanda Smith took up oversight and put me in the capable hands of Jack Harlow who also edited my last book. Jack’s been an amazing editor because he has helped me tone down some of the chapters when I got too excited. And challenged some of my ideas helping me improve them. He’s been incredibly tolerant of me missing deadlines and working around my hectic travel schedule.

This book belongs to all these people who have helped over the past 30 years.
THE MYTH OF THE SHINY HAPPY TRAINER

Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors.
—African Proverb

You’ve got to be kidding, I thought to myself. Did that guy just walk out? Every trainer has a list of what they don’t want to have happen in a classroom. A participant storming out was near the top of mine.

He was tall, mid-40s, with bushy eyebrows and a gray beard. He was sitting in the middle of the classroom and in all honesty, I hadn’t really noticed him until then. Now, I’ll never forget him. We were two hours in—25 participants and me—cocooned in a dingy Moscow classroom.

I had begun explaining the theory of interaction when he pushed back his chair, dragging its feet across the cold, tiled floor, and stood up. Hastily pulling on an overcoat—one of those thick, heavy ones that you see in spy movies set during the Cold War—he stomped out, muttering a string of Russian words that hung in the air like a bad smell. I had no idea what he’d said, but everyone looked at me.
Crap. Was this really happening? I must have looked so dumb, standing there in front of 24 people.

**Shiny Happy Trainers**

I bet you’ve been to training sessions with amazing trainers who come across as consummate professionals. They’re polished, confident, unflappable. They stand in front of the class, using the right facial expressions, looking genuine, and carefully managing each inflection. They pull from their arsenal of nonverbal expressions such as the occasional furrowed brow to make you feel as if you’ve said something profound—that they hadn’t considered until that moment. I have three trainers in mind, and while I can’t recall what they were teaching, I remember being blown away by their incredible stage presence.

I have a term for these trainers: *shiny happy trainers*, from the 1991 song by R.E.M., “Shiny Happy People.”

At that moment in Moscow, I was not a shiny happy trainer.

Moscow is not at its best in November. Sure, it can be pretty in the summer. But at about the same time the air becomes crisp and the leaves turn red in the northern states of America, Moscow goes gray, dirty, and muddy. Even freshly fallen snow has a gray pallor. If someone had said two weeks before that class that I’d be in Russia, I would have laughed and ordered another drink. But here I was with the bearded guy. Or more accurately, without him.

My mistake was picking up the phone. It was a desperate call two weeks ago from Gerhard in Frankfurt.

**I Got That Queasy Feeling**

“Ekhard pulled out of the Moscow gig. Can you do his workshop?” Ekhard was a genial German professor who, like me, ran digital storytelling workshops for journalists. He wasn’t the type of trainer to bail
just two weeks before an event. “It’s just a workshop on digital storytelling, like the one you did in France” Gerhard had said. “Nothing taxing, just wing it—it’s so easy, you can do it in your sleep.”

So easy, you can do it in your sleep. I get a queasy feeling when people tell me something is easy. That statement and its siblings “I’ve got a slide deck; just ad-lib against my bullet points” and “Don’t sweat the details; just be yourself” should set off alarm bells for any trainer. Our instinct should be to run fast from these requests, because there’s no such thing as easy when it comes to training. Just throwing things together is not sufficient.

So I started to say no. I’m a trainer, after all! I don’t just throw things together, I thought, feeling like a shiny happy trainer. I do things right. I start with a needs analysis. I identify the client’s goals, learn about their company, and determine the participants’ skill and experience levels. Then I design exercises and create worksheets to help participants learn skills that assist them in their work. Preparation doesn’t just happen overnight. Nor does booking travel or standing in line at the embassy so a bureaucrat can stamp a visa in my passport.

But the reality is, trainers are often called to deliver training at the last minute. In many organizations, training is the last thing people think of—such as when IT asks you, “We’re rolling out new software to 500 users next week. Can you train them, please?” Disorganization isn’t always the cause of last-minute requests. Maybe a key player leaves the team or drops out, as with Ekhard. In most cases, trainers should say no, but many have no choice. For me, my largest client was in a bind, and it was an important workshop. “No” wasn’t an option.

With some hesitation, I finally agreed, telling him I wasn’t going to “wing it” but would instead follow a rapid instructional systems design process. He put me in touch with Sergei in Russia to get the needs analysis going. It turned out that Sergei wanted a different focus
on digital storytelling than the one I had given in the France workshop. With that in mind, I designed the session, planned exercises, and created worksheets, thinking that I’d accounted for every hypothetical.

Despite the short turnaround, I was feeling confident. Plus, I’d finally get to work in Russia. I’d grown up reading so many spy novels in the 1980s that Russia had this magical hold over my imagination. Add to that, this was back when I lived in the UK, and I was always excited by the prospect of travel to a country I’d never been before. A few days’ work in Moscow would be that adventure and provide serious bragging rights at London cocktail parties—how many people did I know who had worked in Russia? “When I was in Russia . . .” I could start.

Except now I know that this story wasn’t meant to be one to boast about.

**Crimson Red**

As the echo of his footsteps and clunk of the door closing died out, silence fell over the room, and his departure sank in, I experienced what many trainers feel when something goes wrong: guilt. It was my fault. And then I stood there like a deer in the headlights, imagining shiny happy trainers who never had participants storm out of their classroom. And even if that *did* happen, they would react with poise. Look self-assured and smile. Crack jokes and have participants eating out of the palm of their hand. They would know how to get the class back on track.

With slumped shoulders and my heart pounding loud against my chest, I ran through what I could do to salvage the sinking class. I’d led train-the-trainer programs and read plenty of books on the dos and don’ts of being a good trainer. Was I talking too fast? I could slow down. Did I say something that was culturally insensitive? That might
be harder to fix. For what felt like an eternity, my brain fired questions at me, trying to prevent me from being a dull grumpy trainer. (In reality, it was maybe 10 seconds.) Then I stopped: Maybe I was getting all this wrong. He may have just needed to go to the restroom. Perhaps the Russian words he uttered on his way out were, “Man, I gotta go to the men’s room—age, you know.”

I took a deep breath and moved to the next slide. And four more folks shuffled out.

Perhaps you’ve had this experience: Something goes wrong and all eyes are on you. A product you’re demonstrating fails. Or a disruptive participant disputes your slide deck. In a flash, your world slows down. You feel clammy, and you lose your ability to speak eloquently. Words tumble out in staccato fashion—sometimes you even say something you later regret.

Welcome to what I call the great limbic shutdown, in which our brain’s limbic system catapults us into fight or flight mode. Some call it the amygdala hijack—our status is threatened, and we lose our sense of control. My normally pale face went crimson red. But I took a deep breath and managed to summon enough false confidence to suggest that the class take a break. As the remaining 15 participants headed for coffee, Sergei, who had been standing nervously at the door, scrambled across the room in a panic. I looked down and saw that my hand had started to shake. As he neared the front of the room, I put on a brave face and faked a smile.

“Everything going OK, Sergei?”

**Keep Calm and Carry On**

Sergei was standing next to me at the front of the now empty classroom. With a pained expression he put his hand on my shoulder and asked, “Can you teach digital revenue streams?”
“Huh?” I said. He paused, looked at the floor, and said in a low voice, “We advertised this as a workshop on digital revenue streams.”

**TRAINER ANGST**

Trainers face many uncertainties when they walk into a room of people they’ve never met. For all our bravado, we often harbor insecurities that undermine our ability to be focused and deliberate. I call it “trainer angst.” Sometimes it stems from a lack of experience or the simple fear that we’re not great presenters. Or worse, we worry that people won’t like us and will write nasty things on evaluation sheets.

No one likes trainer angst; in fact, a lot of trainers pretend it doesn’t exist. But many who do admit to it have told me that they are worried about “being found out.” I’ve certainly felt that way when running a workshop on content I’m not as familiar with as I would like. To compensate, some trainers generate overconfidence, which creates considerable nervous tension and a less-than-genuine learning experience for participants. Others feel so nervous before a class that they manage only a few hours of sleep. I was one of them once. Even now, I occasionally find myself tossing and turning the night before I conduct a workshop full of people I don’t know.

Overconfidence can manifest in many ways. Sometimes it’s self-congratulatory talk, other times false humility, and still other times throwing around buzzwords and obsessing over the latest fad. Some folks deal with it by attempting to exert more control over the class through insane amounts of preparation or by imposing overbearing rules in class, such as, “Talk only when you have the magic ball” or “No cell phones allowed in class.”

There’s no perfect way to get rid of trainer’s angst. For some, it simply takes time—the more you train, the more comfortable you become with the inherent uncertainty every new class brings. And be in no doubt: Delivering learning is unpredictable and messy. You rarely know ahead of time the hidden agendas, expectations, experience levels, and energy that different participants will bring to the classroom. Success for the seasoned trainer is less about how well they deliver the content than how they draw on these competing dynamics to direct people to the learning objective.
No kidding. And I was the doofus teaching them digital storytelling. What had been the point of the two phone conversations I’d had with Sergei, running through the learning objectives and tweaking them for his participants? And how about the hours I spent administering the needs assessment? And the two days tailoring the session and creating worksheets based on this needs analysis? How did this all happen?

They say that when you have lemons, you should turn them into lemonade. That phrase was probably coined by a perpetually happy person who sees every glass as half full—someone who’d make a terrific shiny happy trainer. Because this situation had a bitter taste, and it wasn’t going away.

After the break, I was able to transition from storytelling to revenue streams. I stuttered and stammered through a lot of it because while I knew enough of the topic to get by at a high level, I had never taught it at the depth that these learners required. While I had participants doing exercises, I was online doing research and emailing colleagues for deeper insights I could add. I had no quippy little stories, charm, or charisma. I just plodded through the topic, at a pace slow enough for me to figure out the next half hour while they did an exercise, and fast enough for them to think I had planned it that way.

Trainers are not supposed to admit things like this. I’m a professional, after all. But I had no choice, and at least after the break, 15 people came back, not demanding a refund. I’d come to this with good intentions and done lots of planning, but because of the communication failure, I had to dump everything I prepared and make it up as we went along.

Isn’t there a rule book for trainers somewhere that says if you don’t know the answer, don’t pretend you do? Well, sometimes it’s not always as straightforward. I’m not suggesting deception, but how would it have gone if I’d stood up and said, “They hired me to teach storytelling,
but told you I was going to teach revenue streams. I’m not prepared for revenue streams—in fact, it actually bores me because I teach storytelling. So while they will still take your registration money, and sure as heck pay me for my efforts, I’m going to wing it and teach something I don’t like and am only a partial expert on. It’ll be a great day, but most of the time, I’ll be two pages in front of you.” Yeah, try that.

Afterward, in a Georgian restaurant, Sergei apologized profusely. But nothing in that lemon of a workshop turned into lemonade. It was physically and mentally exhausting. More things went wrong on that trip where I had to cover for other people’s mistakes, but I’ll tell you about them in the sequel. To this day, my wife remarks on how I arrived home looking like a ghost. I’d gone straight from Heathrow Airport to some American friends in Bayswater for Thanksgiving, and I walked in the door pale and drained.

Most trainers have tough assignments like this—in fact, you’re probably having nasty memories as you read this story. Such is the life of a trainer. But what had gone wrong? I was mad with Gerhard and Sergei. I was angry that I’d been put in a position where I’d stand in front of people and look like an idiot.

Silver Lining
Despite this grueling experience, Moscow clouds have a silver lining. Sergei arranged a tour guide to show me around before I flew home. My guide, Christina, then in her mid-70s, had been a translator for the Soviet propaganda apparatus and introduced me to Russia in a way only a local could. It was incredible—I learned from someone who had lived in Soviet culture and seen all the changes. She gave me a firsthand account of Glasnost and Perestroika—the two defining political pushes at the end of the Soviet era—that corrected my naive understanding gleaned from superficial Western media accounts.
The most exciting part of the tour was when Christina told me she had witnessed a decisive event in history. In May 1972, she was sitting on a bus with other translators waiting for their assignments when a KGB agent—no doubt wearing the kind of overcoat they wore in spy films—climbed aboard, pointed to her, and ordered her to follow him. Moments later, she was translating the social conversation between President Brezhnev and President Nixon. What an amazing experience spending time with walking history.

Being a trainer can be taxing. But it can also expose you to incredible experiences that change the way you see life. In just a few hours, I had learned more about Russian history and culture than I had in six years of high school. Probably worth the anguish of the past few days.

A few weeks later, still mad about the Moscow session, I got some participant feedback. To my disbelief, the session received great feedback, though less surprisingly the first few hours were described as too slow. Most interesting was that they got much more out of the workshop than I thought possible. When people want to learn, they learn. There’s something amazing about the learning process. Often it takes years to appreciate how much it really is about them rather than us. It’s tempting to think that learners’ success comes down to what we do, but in reality, it’s more about what they do.

The Agile Trainer
The fact that those people stormed out of my class was probably a good thing, because every experience offers an opportunity to learn. The tougher the experience, the deeper the learning. As the African proverb suggests, smooth seas do not make skillful sailors. But the whole experience built on a number of things I’d started to reflect on.

I was quite young when I started as a trainer. I was passionate about being a good trainer, so I hoovered up as many tips as I could
from experienced trainers and books on training. They mostly offered tips on how to dress, set up exercises, stay calm in front of a group of people, and not use filler words when presenting. All the things I needed to do to be that shiny happy trainer, most of which constituted a sort of universal rules of training. I learned to get into the room the day before to arrange the tables. Manage group discussions so you didn’t spend more time on the exercises than the instructional designers had allowed. And never walk in front of the projector beam, which they still say today. If you’ve been training for more than 15 minutes, you know what I’m talking about.

What’s funny is that none of these universal rules would have helped me in that workshop in Moscow. For my first 15 years as a trainer, I worked hard to be the shiny happy trainer, from delivering learning in Sydney, Australia, to running seminars in Frankfurt; from facilitating leadership workshops in the South of France to teaching video on the U.S. West Coast. But I must confess, I have discovered that people in my classes get more when I’m not being that shiny happy trainer, when I stop giving smart presentations with cute PowerPoint slides and let them struggle with the learning. When I don’t worry about how good I look in front of a group and instead focus on how well they were doing with their learning. Moscow helped me see some of this, along with thousands of people who have been in my classes over the years.

A big takeaway for me was that when we bomb as a trainer, whether it’s our fault or not, people can still learn. In fact, sometimes they learn more when we bomb because we’re forced to step out of the way. A question I took home from Moscow was whether we as trainers think we play a larger role in a participant’s learning than we really do. Being solidly prepared and doing all the right things does not necessarily prevent training-room disasters. Being agile and focused on learners’ needs is what counts.
One of my all-time favorite jobs was as a talk show host. I was in my early 20s and was on the air every morning from 6 to 8:30. My job required good presentations skills, so as I transitioned into the training world, I found myself relying on those skills to become that shiny happy trainer. Now, more than 25 years later, I wonder whether having those skills actually gets in the way of participant learning. The jury is still out for me on that, but we’ll explore the idea throughout the book.

**The Gritty Reality of Training**

Training is not glamorous work. People will still stomp out of your class for one reason or another. They’ll write nasty things on evaluations and talk about you behind your back. You’ll still miss flight connections and not make it home for your kids’ school play. You’ll have arguments with instructional designers, managers, and learners. And your days will start early, as you beat your participants into the classroom, and end late, as you wait for the last one to leave.

When people think of the ideal trainer, they often think of the shiny happy trainer. They equate the work of training to keynote speaking: Present well and develop a good stage presence. It’s an embedded idea that over the years I have started to question. A good trainer is someone who helps other people learn. They do more than just talking through PowerPoint slides.

I hope you’ll join me on a journey through the gritty reality of being a trainer. Just as Christina introduced me to the real Moscow, I hope to introduce you to the real training life. If you’re already living that life, I hope this book will encourage you as you do good work. There’s a chance, as you read this book, that you might think I stole your stories, changed the names, and made them my own. No, I didn’t. But much of what I’ve been through over the past 25 years or so, across
25 countries, is what many seasoned trainers experience every day around the globe.

I’m hoping that by sharing some of my stories—and those of a number of others who have been kind to add their experiences—I can assure you that you’re not the only one. And for those days you think, “Gee, I didn’t present well” or “My slide deck was crap,” I hope you’ll realize that the notion of a shiny happy trainer who’s slick and well organized is simply a myth.

Some trainers are employed within organizations—some working in a talent or training department, others on their own, slogging away as their company’s sole trainer. Others are freelancers who find themselves working with different people in different organizations in different cities every week. Some work in corporate, others in government agencies or for nonprofits. While the details of what we do and where we do it may be different, many of the dynamics are the same. And we face many of the same challenges: How can we help people be better at what they do, and how can we link their performance to their organization’s needs?

What I share is intended for anyone who works in training and wants to balance the tension of helping both the individual and the organization. And the key to being successful in that endeavor is understanding something that’s at the heart of everything we do. Learning. But what is it?
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Halls woke up one morning and realized he’d been doing workplace training for more than 25 years, in more than 25 countries, with people of more than 25 nationalities. In those years, it seems, more than 25,000 things have happened to him in the classroom that no one ever told him to expect. Hence this book. Now he runs workshops for trainers and speaks at conferences around the globe.

Formerly the head of the BBC’s prestigious television production training department in the UK, Jonathan’s now based in Washington, D.C., where he runs Trainer Mojo, a company that delivers evidence-based train-the-trainer workshops and advanced programs for learning professionals. Author of the profession’s leading book on video for trainers and a contributor to various industry journals, he is also an adjunct professor at George Washington University.

Jonathan is skeptical of fads and buzzwords, often wondering if we’ve lost the art of critical reflection. But then he gets excited because
He keeps bumping into humble trainers who are doing amazing things by applying evidence-based learning practice. Having worked in most facets of learning as a trainer, training manager, learning executive, and contractor, Jonathan has also earned his bread and butter in non-training jobs, including talk show host, journalist, and communications manager. He has both a bachelor’s and master’s in adult learning. In his spare time, he likes cooking, drinking wine, playing the piano, and making furniture. Yes, he really makes furniture.