

**You Said It But Did They Get It?
How To Check For Understanding.**

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You just finished a customer service training for a small group of your company's employees. They listened attentively the whole time your were talking.

Now you stop and ask, "Do you understand?" They nod their heads. You continue, "Do you have any questions?" They shake their heads. "Good," you think. "They've got it."

Or do they? During the next few days, these employees make a number of decisions that cause you to wonder, "Didn't they HEAR what I told them? If they had only LISTENED, they'd know the right thing to do!" You end up spending precious time helping them correct their mistakes and reviewing the information you already gave them. Meanwhile, your company loses productive time (and perhaps a customer or two) while you re-teach and retrain.

So how do you make sure your trainees "get it" the first time you say it? How do you know if they REALLY understand what they hear?



According to Madeline Hunter, former professor of the University of California at Los Angeles and author of *Enhancing Teaching*, you "check for understanding" either during or after you give information to other people. Checking for understanding simply means you stop talking and ask your trainees to SAY or

DO something with the information you just gave him.

You decide to use the following “check-for-understanding” strategies that will give you a good indication of whether or not your trainees understand, remember, and can apply what they have heard.

REPEAT-BACK: Commercial pilots do it all the time because it’s part of the FAA flight regulations. Pilots repeat aloud what the flight control tower tells them to do. This verbal repetition of information serves two purposes: 1. It lets the control tower know if the pilot heard and UNDERSTOOD the information correctly; 2. It gives flight control the opportunity to IMMEDIATELY correct any mistakes in hearing, which, in the case of air travel, can save lives.



No, you don’t say to your trainees, “Repeat what I just said so I can see if you’re listening or

not!” Instead, you ask them to tell you what they just heard so you can make sure you didn’t leave anything out. Or you tell them to repeat what they learned to make sure you explained it clearly enough. Or you ask them to tell each other the three (or two, or four) most important things they remember from the information you just shared. The Repeat-Back will give you immediate feedback as to what they do and don’t understand.

THINK-BACK: Also called “passive reflection,” the Think-Back gives learners time to think about what they have heard. According to David Meier, director of the Center for Accelerated Learning and author of *The Accelerated Learning Handbook*, learners need “to reflect on experience and to create connections, meanings, and values” out of new information.

You ask your trainees to think about the new customer service information and how it fits with what they already know. Or you ask them to share a comment or a question about what they heard you say. Or they take turns telling you one way they might be able to use the new information when working with customers. Again, you will get a clearer picture of what your

trainees do and don't understand from the Think-Back dialogue.

TEACH-BACK: You know your information upside down and inside out. Why? Because you've taught it often enough to groups of trainees so that you've mastered what you teach. Your trainees need to do the same thing - they need to teach the information to each other in order to master it.

You direct your trainees to pair up and to pretend that one person is the "teacher" and one is the "student." The student asks questions about the new customer service information (as if he doesn't know the answers) and the teacher explains the answers. Then they switch roles and repeat the procedure, asking different questions. You listen to their conversations and affirm what they say or correct any misunderstandings. Your trainees can also give each other corrective feedback.

PLAY-BACK: What many people call "role-play," author Robert Lowe calls "improv." In his book *Improvisation, Inc.*, Lowe documents the power of this strategy as a communication, evaluation, and feedback tool. It follows then, that the improv or "Play-Back" is another useful (as

well as fun!) way to check for understanding.



You tell your trainees you are going to do a Play-Back with them to review the most important points of the new customer service information. You describe yourself, the situation, and the roles they will take. You "become" the person you described and your trainees improvise what they would do and say in that situation. The Play-Back can be short - a minute or two - and humorous if you want to ham it up a bit. More importantly, it can reveal how well your trainees are able to apply the new information to a specific work situation.

REPORT-BACK: Learning doesn't end when the information-giving time ends. When a learner applies new information to specific work situations, the learner needs to

report and evaluate the results, and get feedback from the person who taught him or from qualified colleagues. Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan, president of Workshops by Thiagi and author of *Design Your Own Games and Activities*, calls this “The Law of Practice and Feedback.” Thiagi says, “Learners cannot master skills without repeated practice and relevant feedback.”

You arrange with your employees to check back with you at the end of the day (or week), either in person or through email or phone calls. You tell them that you want to know how they used the information they learned, what the results were, and if they encountered any difficulties along the way. After this Report-Back, you give them positive feedback. You might tell them a “glow” and a “grow,” i.e. kudos for what they have done that worked well, and a suggestion for improvement or for going a step further and making it work even better. Or you might ask them to evaluate themselves, and then add your comments to theirs. In effect, you’re checking for long-term understanding and application of the information.

POST-SCRIPT: Now you truly know that your trainees not only HEARD the new information,

but UNDERSTAND it and can APPLY it to specific work situations. They feel good about what they have learned and confident that they can use the new information when they need to. You don’t have to waste valuable company time re-teaching and retraining. By checking for understanding both during and after you share new information with your trainees, you create a win-win learning experience for you, your employees, and your company.

Cited Resources:

Hunter, Madeline. *Enhancing Teaching*.

Lowe, Robert. *Improvisation, Inc.*

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Web-Sites:

www.Bowperson.com

Sharon Bowman, *The Lake Tahoe Trainers Group*

www.alcenter.com

David Meier, *The Center for Accelerated Learning*

www.Thiagi.com

Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan, *Workshops by Thiagi*



Author and traveling teacher Sharon Bowman helps educators and business people “teach it quick and make it stick,” - fine-tuning their information-delivery skills and turning their passive listeners into active learners.

Sharon is the author of six popular teaching, training, and motivation books, including: “*Preventing Death by Lecture*,” “*Presenting with Pizzazz*,” “*How To Give It So They Get It*,” and “*Shake, Rattle, and Roll*.” She is a member of the National Speakers Association and the director of The Lake Tahoe Trainers Group.

She is also the “Trainer’s Coach,” helping individual teachers and trainers polish existing lessons and training programs, and creating new ones that reach all learners.

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