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WHAT MAKES AN AWESOME INSTRUCTOR?

MOST INSTRUCTORS WOULD AGREE that excellent music, choreography, form and cueing are essential to a great group fitness class. So how come some instructors and their classes are more loved by patrons than others when they may be teaching the same class?

Preparation

Know what you're going to teach. In order to consistently tell your class participants, both old and new, what to do and when to do it, you must have a great class plan. They won't know it, but you will have worked hard to create a smooth journey to the final destination. It's also imperative that you have a plan B. If the class is struggling with what you are teaching, what are you going to do? Can you simplify or amend it to suit the class? Most importantly, can you do this without making your participants feel like they are incompetent?

Keep in mind that it is the instructor's role to provide a class that is appropriate for the participants. This is especially applicable to freestyle, but is also relevant to pre-choreographed classes, with the use of options for those who become fatigued and begin compromising their form.

Are you ready to begin at the exact time the class is scheduled to start? Is your music well planned with minimal pauses between CD changes? Have you tested the sound, microphone and any other equipment before the start time? There's nothing more annoying than an instructor who arrives just as the class is due to start, sets up, finds the microphone doesn't work and then takes a further five minutes to realise the battery is flat.

You must also use the pre-class time to help first-timers prepare for your class, whether it's equipment set-up or explaining what will happen in class and how they, as beginners, can still participate when they fatigue. Be early enough to check *everything* and *everyone* out – then you will be prepared.

Education

It should go without saying that as fitness professionals we must always strive to continue updating our education

through courses, seminars, research and events such as FILEX. Some of our best learning can be accomplished by attending other classes and making an evaluation of what we liked or disliked, then amending and improving our classes accordingly. The more we know, the more we can educate our participants. They love to know why they are doing the things we request of them and it can often motivate them to give us that little bit more during class if they know what the benefits are. This also helps to build their trust in you, as a knowledgeable professional.

Looking professional

Your image when teaching and working is important, so make the effort to dress for your class in clean, tidy attire. Look after your appearance, from hair, face and body to shoes. Office jobs demand a certain dress code – the same rules apply to fitness. If you're teaching Pilates, ensure participants can see your hips so you can physically display your hip tilts; a high energy class requires clothes that will keep you cool and so on. If you look like you've made no effort, the assumption will be made that you don't really care. People attend your classes not only because they want to reap the health benefits, but also because they want to look good. As their role model you need to look your best.

Personality and rapport

We all have different personalities, and we can use them to connect with our members. Successful instructors care about their class and have a special rapport with their class members that could be called 'fitness magic'. They build this rapport by exposing aspects of their lives and personalities that relate to their participants. In a post-Christmas class, for example, confessions of over-eating could be divulged along with encouragement to work that little bit harder to fight those festive kilos.

A great rapport-building tool involves simply identifying new participants (without singling them out) and asking them afterwards how they found the class, advising them to stick with it and reassuring them that everyone finds it difficult

when they start. Encourage them that with time and practice, they will learn the moves and increase their fitness, making it easier to keep up. Advise them that before they know it they will be looking for ways to increase the intensity. Ensure your stories and rapport building don't infringe on the flow of your class though.

Leading by example

Being a role model is another important part of the process of being an awesome instructor. Are you working out hard in every class, giving it your all or are you reserved, conserving your energy levels for your next class? If you hold back, so will they. Participants follow your lead – if you're pushing yourself they will feel compelled to do the same, but remember that you must encourage those who are new to take it easier and build to your level. Your physical performance sets the benchmark for the class, helping your participants achieve their workout potential. A great, satisfying workout is one key feature that ensures they will return for another class.

Commending great work

Everyone loves to feel good about themselves and as the group leader you are looked to to provide positive feedback. Acknowledging when members get routines or exercises right, or when they are pushing the boundaries of their fitness levels is essential throughout the class. Tell participants that you appreciate their hard work and explain what it is doing for them and how it is helping them reach their goals. If your members leave feeling good, they will come back looking for that feeling again.

Having a good time

Are you having a good time at work, or is it just another class? The third class you teach on Wednesday may be your participant's only opportunity all day to take time out of their lives to work towards their fitness goal. It's your job to give them your all and enjoy what you do! Leave your personal issues at the door, and focus on your class. Put your fitness instructor persona on and be professional, helpful, educational and happy – and enjoy your time in the limelight! Appreciate the fact that your participants have chosen to train with you and give them what they came for, a great workout with a great instructor. Not everyone gets a group of people who specifically come to spend time with them – so remember that you're special.

Having time after class

Always ask how the participants found your class. Invite them to give you feedback. If there is a class straight after yours, let people know you'll be outside and available for any questions or feedback. By gauging how people feel, you can tailor your class to suit their needs. Some people may have requests you cannot fulfil; but even in these cases you'll be able to explain to them why the class is structured this way

for their own health and safety. This again shows your class members you are interested in them, their needs and their goals. It makes you approachable and gives participants an opportunity to say things that they may feel uncomfortable saying in front of a group. If you don't gauge feedback, how can you evolve as an instructor?

Being your best every time

As professionals we are experts in the tools of our trade and make it look easy. To the untrained eye we just turn on some music and jump around for an hour. As such, participants can be the harshest critics, judging a class or instructor without understanding what goes into teaching group fitness. They make time in their hectic schedules to dedicate to their fitness, so expectations are high. Keeping this in mind, we need to be the best instructors we can be, every time.

By remembering and practicing the above points, we can focus on presenting great classes every time, maintaining a high standard in group fitness. This in turn ensures larger class numbers, which spur us on to greater heights in instruction. ■



Paul Peroy

Paul started his movement career as a dancer and choreographer, and moved into group fitness in 1993. Further studies included fitness trainer and freestyle, Pilates and BODYPUMP® instructor. Paul has taught, trained, coordinated and managed in many of Sydney's leading facilities. Now the group fitness manager of all Lifestyle Fitness Australia Clubs, he plans to present and continue furthering his education.



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