EVIDENCE BRIEFER

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING MORE EFFECTIVE TRAINING PROGRAMS: EVIDENCE FROM AN EVALUATION SERIES

IRI INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE
Advancing Democracy Worldwide

Evidence Briefer: Designing and Implementing More Effective Training Programs: Evidence from an Evaluation Series

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) projects often train local stakeholders to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to enact or advance sustainable democratic change. While DRG funders and implementers regularly inventory commonly used approaches and metrics, they less frequently have the resources to complete rigorous evaluations to determine what approaches work best depending on the context and conditions. The limited evidence available on training approaches suggests one reason training interventions fail to achieve impact is because they are often not designed to incorporate lessons on adult learning best practices.

To fill this gap, the Evidence and Learning Practice at the International Republican Institute (IRI) completed a series of evaluations on projects that use training to increase participants' access to information to catalyze behavior change. This report includes insights on the characteristics of training that contribute to success (or failure), providing guidance for future programming. Three main considerations for programs implementing a training approach include:

1. Build buy-in for the training.

Buy-in for training is crucial for results. When participants are personally invested in a training topic, they are motivated to implement what they learn. In addition, when those selecting participants – such as, supervisors, organization leaders, and implementing partners – are invested in a training and recognize the value of the information being shared, they are more likely to select the most appropriate participants to attend and are more likely to support implementing changes based on the training. In some cases, this buy-in may not exist and activities to build or increase buy-in need to be implemented before or alongside training activities. This is an often overlooked and under-resourced component of implementing training programs.

2. Connect training concepts to participants' own work.

For adult learners, connecting new ideas to their work is key for retention. This goes beyond interactive exercises to providing opportunities for participants to apply the training material in their daily work and roles. Training approaches that explicitly make this connection are more successful in achieving behavioral change. Training approaches that fail to make this direct and explicit connection may result in increased knowledge among participants but are less likely to result in meaningful shifts in behavior.

3. Identify the intended level of change.

Training approaches can catalyze individual change, but they are typically less effective, on their own, in driving organizational change. For individuals, implementing new knowledge or skills from training can be done relatively easily. However, increasing the knowledge or skills of individuals is just one step in the process of organizational change. Other steps include raising awareness for change and building desire for change within an organization. Implementing activities to build awareness of and desire for the intended change before or alongside training activities can result in more successful programming. Only training individuals and expecting changes at the organizational level is not an effective approach.

FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this evaluation series was to understand the factors that lead to successful training. To do this, IRI created a rubric to assess if and how projects follow adult learning best practices. The rubric is represented visually by a two-by-two conceptual map with axes for training targeting and training structure, as shown in Figure 1.

Each component – targeting and structure – includes two subcomponents that combine to make a total score for each category. Training targeting includes scores for participant selection and training content. Training structure includes scores for delivery and dosage. A breakdown of these subcomponents is shown in Table 1 below.
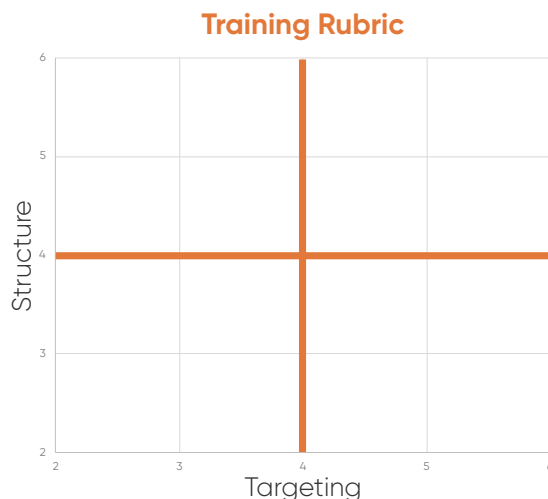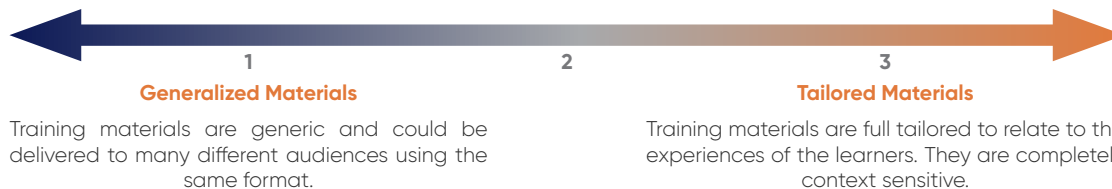
Figure 1: Training Rubric, 2x2 Map

Training Rubric

Table 1: Training Rubric, Scoring Subcomponents

Targeting

	1	2	3
Learner Selection	**Wide Range** Learners attending the training are not targeted based on any specific criteria. A wide audience is invited.		**Highly Targeted** Learners are highly targeted and specifically invited based on explicit criteria.
Content	**Generalized Materials** Training materials are generic and could be delivered to many different audiences using the same format.		**Tailored Materials** Training materials are full tailored to relate to the experiences of the learners. They are completely context sensitive.

Structure

	1	2	3
Delivery	**Lecture Style** Training is delivered via lecture style presentation or webinar. PowerPoint slides may be used but learners are not expected to complete activities or work in groups.		**Activity-based** Training is delivered via an activity-based session. Participants are provided opportunities to work together and apply lessons directly.
Dosage	**Short/One-off** Training is comprised of a singular, short lecture or webinar. It is not part of a series designed to deliver information over time.		**Training Series** Training is comprised of a series of events with the same learners or involves a multi-day workshop and follow-up.

KEY INSIGHTS

TARGETING

Developing training participant profiles helps guide the participant selection process.

At IRI, program teams rarely select training participants directly. In most cases, teams rely on local partners or organizations to select attendees. In all three case studies, IRI included a list of training topics or specific participant criteria in the training invitations to ensure training participants matched our intended learners. For example, in two cases, IRI provided descriptions of the trainings and outlined the characteristics of target participants to political party leaders involved in participant selection. In the third case, IRI developed a tool to prioritize CSOs according to specific criteria along with a participant profile to guide CSOs' selection of members to send to the training.

Similarly, the program team developed a participant profile to target government officials at multiple levels in another of its training approaches. In all three cases, training participants matched IRI's intended learner and participants reported the training topics closely aligned with their roles within their political parties. Developing participant profiles and including these along with training topics in the training invitations can help guide participant selection even when IRI is not directly involved in that process.

Tailored training content builds motivation.

Based on our literature review of adult learning best practices, training content should be adapted to the specific country or region in which it is being delivered to ensure materials are both relevant and culturally appropriate. The level of tailored training content varied across the three case studies, ranging from geographically relevant examples to specific instances from participants' own work and experience.

The least tailored training content among the case studies provided contextually similar examples and adapting the discussion to different audiences. Another case tailored the content further using an analysis of the country's political context, political parties' social media activity, and additional research on the participants' context and needs. The most tailored content included insights from a needs assessment, trainers with experience in the relevant government institutions, and feedback from political parties on the training curriculum.

STRUCTURE

Connection between training content and desired behavior change must be explicit.

To support retention, adult learners need opportunities to apply the training content to their real lives. Training led to increased knowledge retention and behavior changes in cases where 1) content was tailored to participants' roles, context, and baseline knowledge and 2) participants had opportunities to apply what they learned to their own work during and between training sessions. Positive impacts were less apparent where the training content was tailored and included interactive elements but did not provide the connection or application learners needed to implement what they learned in their own work. In these cases, participants reported increased knowledge of training topics but only a few could provide specific examples of how they had applied what they learned after attending the training.

Adult learning best practices are key irrespective of training format.

With the advent of social distancing policies, virtual and hybrid training approaches have become more common. While IRI's evaluation did not necessarily focus on differences in training format, several considerations emerged. In one case, one training session was in-person while another was virtual. IRI expected in-person training session to lead to higher levels of knowledge gain and, therefore, better results. However, this was not the case. Regardless of training format, it is important to incorporate adult learning best practices.

Virtual formats bring additional considerations for how to maximize adult learning best practices while meeting program goals. For example, virtual training approaches might be more convenient in cases where the intended training participants are dispersed geographically. In this case, a virtual format could improve participant selection by ensuring intended participants can join from remote locations. On the other hand, IRI's external trainer reported the virtual training was less interactive than similar in-person training sessions. Based on this, virtual training approaches should consider ways to increase engagement and motivation among participants who may not be as focused as in-person participants.

RESULTS

Organizational level change requires more than knowledge gain.

IRI often trains individuals with the goal of organizational-level change. However, training only addresses one dimension of organizational change – knowledge to implement a change – while failing to address other key dimensions, such as broader organizational awareness of and desire for change. In one case, IRI successfully developed and leveraged political parties' awareness of and desire for change. IRI also targeted political party leaders or members who had the power to implement changes or the ability to make serious recommendations to party leaders. This resulted in changes at the organizational level. In the two other cases, participants lacked the power to implement meaningful changes at the organizational level.

Buy-in among the target population is key.

Ensuring those selecting training participants have buy-in for and clearly understand the training topics is key to getting the most appropriate participants to attend the training. In one case, IRI developed this buy-in in several ways, including training on topics of clear interest to the parties, relationship building with party members, using feedback from leadership on training topics, and delivering high quality training from respected officials. This buy-in meant party leaders were open to change, trusted the information they received, and sent the most appropriate training participants. In the two other cases, the programs lacked this buy-in from relevant leaders. Even though participants matched IRI's intended profile in both cases, participants reported a lack of motivation among their supervisors to implement changes.

Continued engagement is important for the sustainability of results.

Training approaches often assume increased information will lead to a desired behavior change. However, there are many steps between these two results. In one case, IRI provided additional support to participants after the training was finished, including access to the trainers, additional resources, and continued communication with the participants to answer additional questions. In the two other cases, IRI did not provide as much additional support, and participants reported several barriers, including the need for additional resources and training, to implement what they learned.

PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evaluations' findings, funders, and implementers should implement the following recommendations to improve training design and implementation:

Develop buy-in from the people selecting participants for the training.

Implementers should ensure leaders selecting participants for the training have buy-in for the training topics and understand the purpose of the training. This increases the chance that the most appropriate participants are selected to attend the training. There are several ways IRI has seen program teams successfully build buy-in, including involving those selecting participants in the training development process, surveying leadership, and/or training participants to capture training topics of interest, building strong relationships with target population, e.g., political party or CSO leadership, and leveraging the political context or incentives that already exist.

Outline the process for change and anticipate barriers.

When designing the training approach, implementers should outline the process for change, including explicit steps between the initial knowledge gain and the intended behavior change. This provides clarity for the implementer on the results to expect and, when communicated clearly during the training, provides participants with clear next steps. Additionally, this process can also help implementers anticipate any barriers participants might face when attempting to implement what they learn. Identifying barriers at the design phase allows teams to address, or at least acknowledge, them in the training.

Incorporate opportunities for participants to apply what they learn to their own work.

When designing training approaches, implementers should incorporate opportunities during or between training sessions for participants to apply what they learn to their own work. Doing this promotes knowledge retention and allows participants to connect what they are learning to their own lives. Implementers, local staff, and trainers should provide support as participants apply concepts and skills to their own work and address any questions or challenges that may arise. This could include access to the trainers; additional resources, such as guidance, templates, mentors or financial support; or communication channels with fellow participants or peers.

Provide additional support outside of the training sessions.

While it is not possible to provide endless support, implementers should provide at least some ongoing support to participants beyond the training. Ideally, this would include additional program interventions, like consultations, mentors, or networks, to provide sufficient support when implementing changes. When that is not feasible, the support can be simpler, such as continued communication with local partners or trainers and/or training content. Another option is to create a space for participants to connect and communicate with each other, which can increase the chance participants maintain connections outside of the training sessions.

Set external trainer(s) up for success.

When selecting external training partners, implementers should identify the key characteristics of trainers that will contribute to the training's success. These characteristics should include not only the trainers' expertise in the field, but also their practical experience and credibility among participants. Implementers should ensure trainers have critical information on the political context, baseline knowledge and motivation of intended participants, and barriers participants might face when implementing what they learn. When trainers are developing the content, implementers should set clear expectations and share the program and training objectives with the trainer. This will help align the goals of the implementer and the external trainers.

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