

Enhancing Florida Farm Bureau Organizational Interactions through Active, Thematic Instruction: “Lessons Learned from George Strait!”

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Introduction

This practice presentation will discuss the effective delivery of a Farm Bureau professional development workshop, entitled “Enhancing Organizational Interactions: Lessons Learned from George Strait!” There are four overarching learner objectives within the workshop that combine to achieve the end goal of enhancing the Florida Farm Bureau organization.

These objectives include: (a) “Identify and utilize individual proficiency and behavioral diversity at the county level,” (b) “Develop commitment in committees: Learn how to create and maintain helpful county Farm Bureau committees,” (c) “Manage financial resources in accordance with Farm Bureau accepted practice,” and (d) “Develop a proactive issues management plan.” During development of the workshop, a lack of connectivity was identified among these four overarching objectives. To address this problem, thematic instruction was implemented.

The goal of this practice presentation is to present a guide on how to effectively utilize thematic instruction in order to enhance learning retention and the likelihood of behavior change among program participants. In specific, three areas will be discussed:

- Use of instructor prompts to relate material in each objective to the George Strait Farm Benefit concert theme;
- Implementation of an acronym as a learning checkup to remind participants of the progress they have made;
- Application of learning activities connecting to the George Strait theme.

Background

The enhancing organizational interactions workshop was part of a *Strengthening the Voice* series for the Florida Farm Bureau. This series addresses the expressed need by Florida Farm Bureau’s upper management for an interactive train-the-trainer approach aimed at extending key professional development information to the county level. Each train-the-trainer workshop consists of three major parts: (a) an Instructor’s Manual, (b) a Participant’s Manual, and (c) a video-interactive PowerPoint presentation.

To augment the likelihood of behavior change, the six components of Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM) theory were applied within the workshop (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). For example, one component of CBSM includes commitment. This workshop utilized commitment through a set best practices (specific learner objectives within each overarching objective), relating to the concept of Best Management Practices that many farmers and ranchers are familiar with. Upon completion of the workshop, participants were asked to *commit* to specific best practices they will apply in the near future, and sign their name to seal the commitment. Such techniques are proven successful for increasing the likelihood of behavior change, which is the goal of any educational program (Birkenholz, 1999; McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999; Nilson, 2003).

How it works

To better connect the four workshop objectives, instructor prompts, reminding trainers to connect to the George Strait theme, were implemented within the Instructor's Manual. Material in each objective related to the George Strait Farm Benefit concert theme and this theme developed as the workshop progressed. At the end of the workshop, participants will successfully recruit George Strait (having learned all the necessary workshop material).

The following is an example of how the first objective was connected to the concert theme, taken from the introduction in the Instructor's Manual:

The stages involved with putting together a concert directly relate to the four interconnected objectives of the organizational interactions workshop. First of all, everyone involved in the planning of the concert (i.e. local Farm Bureau membership and staff) has certain skills and resources they can bring to the table. The first objective of Enhancing Organizational Interactions involves a personality assessment of workshop participants. We've got to identify our strengths the same way that George Strait's tour manager identifies who's best for selling t-shirts (that really talkative guy), who's best for setting up the stage (the really muscular guy), or who's most appropriate to operate the sound and lights (the gal with attention for detail)...

In addition to relating the learning material to the George Strait Farm Benefit concert theme, a GEORGE acronym was used as a learning checkup. Upon completion of the workshop, participants successfully recruited GEORGE to the concert (learned the workshop material). This acronym was built as the workshop progressed, and stood for:

- **G**etting to know yourself
- **E**mploying strategies to work with diverse personalities
- **O**rganizing committees to get the job done
- **R**ecognizing individual strengths and weaknesses
- **G**aining a better understanding of how to manage local Farm Bureau resources
- **E**ffectively tracking issues facing agriculture and the Farm Bureau

The last major component of the workshop was a set of activities that tied in the George Strait Farm Benefit concert with challenging Farm Bureau organizational themes. The activities provided opportunity to personally experience and discuss the concepts being learned. An example of two activities included the "George Strait Recruitment Committee," where participants learned how about committee roles and responsibilities, and "Breaking the Piggy Bank for Farm Benefit & George Strait," where participants learned about budgeting.

Results to date

The "Enhancing Organizational Interactions: Lessons Learned from George Strait" workshop was delivered on February 28, 2007 to 20 Farm Bureau employees at the state office. Participants maintained an enthusiastic involvement throughout the four hours of the workshop. Regarding the George Strait learning activities, the Executive Director expressed, "I can't believe that even the hard-headed ones became actively involved" (P. Cockrell, personal communication, February 28, 2007). During the workshop, all participants were actively involved and participant discussion of the workshop material continued after completion of the training.

Conclusions/Recommendations

With thematic instruction, learning about typically difficult subjects such as “Financial Management” can be effective and fun. The Farm Bureau employees who received the training from this workshop expressed a high level of enthusiasm and embraced the diverse approach of connecting “Organizational Interactions” to a George Strait Farm Benefit concert.

Recommendations for utilizing thematic instruction include, (a) providing prompts to remind trainers to constantly relate learning material to one consistent theme, (b) using and building an acronym throughout a workshop to maintain participants’ curiosity while also serving to recap what they have learned, and (c) implementing an activity within each major point in an intensive training workshop to maximize learning retention.

References

Birkenholz, R.J. (1999). *Effective adult learning*. Danville, IL: Interstate Publishers.

McKenzie-Mohr, D., & Smith, W. (1999). *Fostering sustainable behavior: An introduction to community-based social marketing*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers.

Nilson, L.B. (2003). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors* (2nd ed.). Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company.