

LECTURE 4

What Makes a Good Personal Trainer?

- **Different types of trainers**
- **The importance of reflection**
- **S.H.R.E.M.E.**

We've talked about what makes a professional and we've discussed professional practice, but now we want to talk about what you actually DO, not in terms of exercises and so on – we'll come to that later – but in the way you would DESCRIBE what you do. There are a number of words you might use but each of them has a slightly different meaning, so let's look at them one by one.

You can call yourself different things:

1. Trainer. Taking the word from your title, you might call yourself a "trainer". But what does that mean? "Training" people means that you get them to do something that they couldn't do before. But it also implies that they don't have to understand WHY they are doing it. You can train a dog to jump through a hoop, but it doesn't know why. It just does it because it's been trained. Is that what we want with our clients? It might make life easier for us, but is it the best thing for THEM?

2. Demonstrator. That's an essential part of the job. You DEMONSTRATE how to do exercises with the correct technique. That way the client will get the maximum benefit and not injure themselves. The trouble with that is, it's all too easy, especially with a group of people, to do a particular exercise perfectly (because you CAN do it) and then leave the client to just get on with it. But what if they can't do it; they're not at that stage yet? They need a modification of the exercise. You need to be MORE than just a demonstrator.

For demonstrating, we're going to give you a golden rule – and it's something we will be repeating over and over again because it's so important. When you are demonstrating, **do the easiest version of the exercise first.** Then you can say – "if you find that easy, try the next stage, which is a little bit harder" – and so on. If you do it the other way round– ie demonstrate the hardest version (a chance for you to show how good you are –"Look at me – aren't I brilliant!"), you will make the clients who CAN'T do it as well as you, feel a failure. And what's worse, they will try to do what you are doing and a) do it badly and b) run the risk of injuring themselves.

3. Coach. This is a word that is used a lot these days in connection with personal trainers. And it has lots of positives. It implies that you are helping clients to get from where they are to where they (or you) want them to be (which is excellent educational practice). If you are lucky and everything works well, you'll be able to go in a straight line. More often than not however, you'll need to take side steps, develop certain aspects of strength or technique or whatever, before you can then move forward again. And from the coach's point of view that requires a lot of skill, understanding and judgement. But there is also a difficulty with the word "coach". It implies that the coach is helping the client to get better and better and better. And of course, for many of them, that is exactly what they want. But what about the client who is not interested in that? They just want an all-round level of fitness but they don't want to get bored doing the same thing over and over again. A different set of skills is needed for those clients.

4. Teacher. This word is not often used when describing personal trainers but perhaps it actually is the best one. Teachers will train, demonstrate and coach but they will do more. **They educate.** They will get to understand what their clients need and what's more, know how the needs can be met. And often those needs will be something the client isn't even aware of. They will develop a partnership with the client where they will work together, each one taking some responsibility. For this the teacher's judgement, knowledge and experience will be essential but a teacher also inspires, motivates and encourages. It's a pretty tall order but it's one that brings immense satisfaction. For a teacher, seeing your 82-year old female client's delight at being able to do a boxing session with her PT is just as satisfying as witnessing your formerly grossly overweight male client smash an Ironman.

Now, it doesn't matter ultimately what you call yourself – it depends what you feel comfortable with. The trend these days is for people to refer to themselves as coaches but personal trainer is fine. The important thing is to take the positives from the four titles above and avoid the negative connotations in your behaviour and outlook.

Reflecting

So, where have we got to in this business of becoming a good, professional exercise and fitness practitioner?

Obviously, you've got to know your stuff and be able to demonstrate it but at the same time being upfront about your particular limitations, particularly when you find a client can do something better than you can. That's one of the hardest things to swallow: being able to praise the client and not feel that you are a failure in some way.

You've got to be able to take them from where they are to where you want them to be and in doing that, you have to use your judgement and assessment skills. And in addition, you are educating them: inspiring, motivating and encouraging.

A key feature in developing these skills is to **REFLECT** on what you are doing. That way, you use your experience and gain from it moving forward.

You don't want to get to the end of your career and tell someone you've had forty years' experience, only for them to say:

"You've not had 40 years' experience; you've had one year, repeated 40 times?"

The way to get useful, meaningful experience that develops and increases over time is to REFLECT.

How do I reflect?

As you do a session, or shortly afterwards, there are some simple questions that you can ask yourself. To make it easier to remember, we've put them in the form of an acronym –

S H R E M E. The letters stand for **S**tile, **H**ealth and **S**afety, **R**elationship, **E**xercises, **M**otivation and **E**thics.

Style. In the session, what coaching/teaching style did you adopt? Was it hard-hitting and upbeat or was it gentler, softly encouraging? This will depend on the client and the situation but was it **appropriate** for that client and that situation? It will depend on your ability to "read" the client and what they needed at that time.

Health and Safety. Had you checked that everything in the surroundings was safe for the client? Had you checked with the client that they hadn't got any health issues that you should have been aware of?

Relationship. What steps did you take to develop your relationship with the client, develop rapport? Apart from doing the exercises, how did you get to know them a bit more?

Exercises. What went well in terms of the exercises you gave the client to do? Why? What didn't go so well and why? Did the client perform in the way that you expected? If not, why? How will you move forward with the client?

Motivation. How did you motivate the client? Did you shout at them, explain the benefits of exercise to them? Encourage and sympathise? None of these are wrong in themselves but they have to be right for that particular client at that particular time.

Ethics. How would you be able to justify as a professional, how you behaved with the client and what you gave them to do. (See "Virtual Law Court" Example below).

Example:

Second session with Emily, a 35 year old female client. During your first session with her, she breezed through it and appeared very competent. During this second session you upped the weights and reps.

Style: she seemed rather tired and out of sorts, so I adopted a softer and more sympathetic approach than I had done in the first session

Health and Safety: I didn't ask her whether she had any health concerns, whether she had slept badly the night before or was there anything I should know about (was she dehydrated for example). – I just got on with the session. On reflection I should have asked her those questions.

Relationship: although we got on well like last time, I could have tried to draw her out more about her personal circumstances. But I tried to appear sympathetic to her difficulties.

Exercises: I had prepared the session, I had a plan and the room was set out well, with all the necessary equipment to hand. Emily struggled to do the exercises with the weights and reps I had planned, even though they were only slightly higher than the first session. I am pleased that I took early action and abandoned my original plan because the amended session went well and she seemed happier by the end.

Motivation: I think it was right that I changed my plan and was gently encouraging, offering lots of praise when she did things well.

Ethics: I maintained a friendly but professional relationship. I was careful not to seem to be prying into her affairs but asked her open questions about how she was feeling as we went through the programme. And I was careful not to push her too hard physically when she was obviously struggling.

Of course, this isn't the only way you can reflect. There is a famous model of reflection known as the Gibbs Reflective Cycle (because it was invented by Dr Graham Gibbs of the University of Huddersfield). You can look it up by going to <https://www.ed.ac/reflection/reflectors-toolkit/reflecting-on-experience/gibbs-reflective-cycle>.

But a very quick summary of the Gibbs Cycle and one which you can hold in your head easily is the following:

- What happened?
- So what?
- What next?

At first, and particularly when you are training to become qualified, you will probably gain the most value from reflection by actually sitting down and writing out the answers to the questions. And in doing so, take into account what you have read, and/or what a more experienced colleague has to say about it.

As you become more used to the process, you'll find that you are able to do it in your head actually in the session itself.

A good private game to play and one that is highly effective, is to imagine that you are going to have to justify your session in court. We call the game, "Virtual Law Court". In the game, you imagine how you would answer up to a prosecuting attorney who is trying to show the court that you are incompetent and don't know what you are doing. Think of the nasty questions they may put to you, particularly in that sneering way we've all seen in films and on television.

Because it's only a game, nothing depends on it in reality but what it does, is sharpen your thinking. It makes you **reflect**. You might find yourself at the end of a particular session saying to yourself,

"That attorney could have got me on what I did there: so I won't do that again".

Or.

"I would be quite happy to answer up to anyone about what I did in that session."

In other words, you have actually gained from your experience.

Example:

Virtual Law Court

You are training a 64 year old man. He seems quite fit, he's very enthusiastic and you get on well with him. He seems quite obsessed with how much he can lift – it matters to him how strong he is. You greatly suspect that he doesn't want to admit he's getting older and possibly getting weaker. In the last session with him, he said to you. "I want to see how much weight I can actually lift" and because you'd been getting on so well with him and having a laugh with him, you went along with it.

STOP – ENTER THE VIRTUAL LAW COURT

Sneering Attorney: So tell me, how do you justify allowing a 64 year old man whom you had known only for a short time, to lift weights until he collapsed from exhaustion?

You: Well ... er ... he wanted to do it.

Sneering Attorney: He wanted to do it? And as a professional do you ALWAYS allow your clients to do exactly what they want?

You: Well ... er ... no.

Sneering Attorney: Did it occur to you that you might be putting an excessive strain on his heart? His nervous system? His skeleton and muscles? That he might be risking serious injury?

You: Er...er ... well...

Sneering Attorney: I put it to you that you are GUILTY of professional negligence!

So. We've talked about being a professional and acting professionally and ethically. We've talked about how you develop as a personal trainer so that you gain experience and we've talked in general terms about your relationship with a client.

In the next lecture we're going to move on to what you actually DO when you meet a client for the first time. What's the process?