

Resetting group expectations with a disruptive apprentice



A scenario-based learning resource to support trainers and assessors.

Focus

Managing challenging behaviours: Identifying strategies to reduce the impact of challenging student behaviours and improve the overall learner experience.

Scenario

Liam was a first-year automotive apprentice in a structured workshop training program. He was capable, picked up practical tasks quickly, and worked well when given direct job instruction. However, his behaviour in group training was quite different. He regularly interrupted explanations, spoke over other learners and made jokes when classmates answered questions incorrectly.

When asked to focus, Liam would roll his eyes, smirk or respond with comments like, "Yeah, I already know that." He also dismissed some safety reminders as obvious or unnecessary.

The effect on the group was clear. Other apprentices were speaking less, asking fewer questions and becoming more hesitant to participate. The trainer could see that the issue was no longer just about Liam. It was starting to reduce focus, trust and learning across the whole group.

The challenge

The trainer needs to address disruptive behaviour without escalating conflict.

While Liam's behaviour was frustrating, the bigger issue was its impact on the rest of the group.

If the trainer ignored it, confidence across the group would continue to decline. If the trainer challenged it too strongly in front of the group, the situation could escalate and further damage the relationship.

The trainer needed to act early, stay in control and protect the learning environment without turning the issue into a public confrontation

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Solutions

The trainer addressed the issue directly and professionally. First, they reset expectations with the whole group at the start of the next session. They used simple, workplace-focused language and linked expected behaviour to workshop standards. It was made clear that learners needed to work collaboratively - listening, following instructions, respecting one another, and contributing in ways that supported safe learning. The message was brief and neutral, so it didn't single Liam out.

Second, the trainer spoke privately with Liam during a break. They described the behaviour specifically rather than using labels – mentioning interruptions, comments when others answered questions, and dismissive responses during safety discussions. They explained the impact clearly: other learners were holding back, the session was losing focus, and safety messages were being diluted.

The trainer remained calm and direct. They asked Liam what was driving the behaviour and listened to the response. Liam admitted he found parts of the session repetitive and became bored when content moved too slowly. This gave the trainer useful information, but it didn't excuse the behaviour. The trainer made it clear that while experience and confidence are valuable, they don't give the right to dominate the session or shut others down.

The trainer then gave Liam a clear role in the next practical session, asking him to demonstrate an inspection step and explain the correct process to the group. This redirected Liam's contribution to a structured task and placed responsibility on him to model the expected behaviour. The trainer closely monitored this, reinforcing what Liam did well while ensuring his contributions remained aligned with best practices and supported the group's learning.

The trainer also changed the group management by adding more pair work and short, structured questions, providing quieter learners with a safer way to participate.

When Liam contributed appropriately, followed instructions, or supported a classmate constructively, the trainer acknowledged it immediately. This reinforced the standard expected in the session.

Over the following weeks, the trainer kept brief notes on key incidents and improvements. The behaviour began to settle. Liam remained outspoken, but was less disruptive, and the rest of the group began participating more confidently again.

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4 fast in-class strategies to reduce the impact of difficult behaviours

1. Regroup

Regularly regrouping helps trainers to stay in control of the group and ensures that more challenging students are distributed across the room.

3. Give them a role

Some students become easily bored. Giving them a useful job in class (e.g., scribe, observer, fact checker, resource compiler) can give them purpose and help keep their focus on something constructive.

2. Redirect

Sometimes trainers need to act like traffic controllers, redirecting where contributions come from — moving between groups or from one side of the room to the other. This helps manage dominant participants and creates space for others to contribute.

4. Keep them busy

Movement is a positive aspect of training – it keeps learners physically and mentally engaged, which can boost focus, participation, and retention. Aim to move students around the room regularly. This could be to complete a poster task, to do a “stand and share” activity in pairs, or to perform a practical demonstration. You can also include bonus activities or extension tasks for quick finishers to keep them engaged throughout.

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Next steps

Other trainers can apply this learning by:

- setting expectations early and link them to workplace standards
- addressing challenging behaviour privately, using specific examples rather than labels
- explaining the impact of the behaviour on the whole group, not just on the trainer
- channeling strong personalities into structured roles that support the session
- using training methods that support safer participation for quieter learner
- reinforcing positive behaviour consistently, not just correct poor behaviour
- keeping brief records of incidents, actions and improvements when behaviour impacts learning or safety.

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