

Consumer's Guide to Excellent Environmental Training

How to Make Sure You are Getting Best Value

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Environmental training is becoming more and more important as legal requirements increase, public expectations rise, agency budgets shrink and staff numbers dwindle. Improving the cost-effectiveness and integrity of your NEPA compliance process is crucial to successfully completing agency missions, whether they be highway construction, telecom permitting, land and resource management, or homeland security.

While you have to decide the specifics of what you want out of environmental training for your staff, certain fundamentals remain the same whether you are seeking training on NEPA, cultural resources management, public involvement, environmental management systems, or environmental leadership. For example, you probably want or need at least one item on this list:

- Trainers who are experienced environmental professionals
- Trainings that are designed to meet your specific needs and objectives – that solve your specific problems in your way
- Content that is based on industry best practices, modeled on successful practitioners not academic theory
- Trainers who have real in-agency experience, not academics or lawyers or English teachers
- Trainers who consult, and consultants who train because combining the best of both worlds adds to the experience of the participants in the training
- Companies that adhere to professional guidelines established by environmental associations
- Companies with outstanding ratings in the business community
- Companies that are easy to do business with

Here are some guidelines on what to look for and questions to ask of prospective vendors to ensure you get the high quality environmental training you expect, need, and are paying for.

Environmental Experience

Have the trainers worked inside agencies, consulting firms, universities, advocacy groups, political institutions? While any one of these will provide useful experience, often it is the **breadth** of the trainer's experience that is helpful in guiding training participants to new awareness and capability.

Do the trainers have real **environmental** experience, or only training experience? Have they actually participated in **projects**, or only read about them? Do they belong to professional environmental **organizations**? Have they **published** in professional journals or presented at environmental meetings? Have they been recognized with **awards** as outstanding contributors to the environmental arena?

Do they hold **degrees** in environmental subject matter, or does their **career history** reflect their involvement in environmental policy or practice?

Training Capability

How much training and experience do the trainers have in **training**? Are they subject-matter experts who can do a little stand-up, or are they **skilled trainers and presenters** with strong backgrounds in group process, adult learning training design, and content delivery along with their subject matter expertise?

Do they **design** their own trainings, or merely present what others have developed? Do they **work closely** with your subject matter experts and/or training department to create training that meets your specific objectives, or only provide “one-size-fits-all” seminars?

Do they emphasize **hands-on** classroom activities to transfer skills, or do they only lecture “about” the skills? Do they focus on **how to do** something, or only what to do? Are group and class sizes kept small so there is opportunity for **one-on-one coaching**? Do they design their trainings to produce **lasting change**? Do they encourage and participate in Level 3 and Level 4 **evaluations**?

Do they use examples from their own **environmental experience**? Do they demonstrate **“lessons learned”** from their own and others’ experience? Do they **assist participants** to develop strategies for success?

Do they propose to use **examples** from your organization in your classes? Do they **request materials** well in advance to ensure enough time to tailor the class to your needs? If they are providing a fully custom training, do they **meet with your subject matter experts**, offer to provide review drafts, pilots and/or peer-reviewed sessions? How do they take into account your **organizational culture** in designing custom trainings?

How willing is the trainer, or the company, to **make changes and revisions** in the training design or specific components? Revisions can be needed because of changing environmental laws, regulations, policies or procedures, and also because the training itself needs to be realigned with objectives, culture, or budgets.

How to Evaluate Environmental Training

The best way is to **attend a sample** of the kind of training you seek to implement in your organization. While this may not be possible (you may not be able to get permission to attend an in-house training for another organization), the evidence of your own eyes and ears is always the best. Consider purchasing a tailored version of the training you want, to assess the style and content for yourself.

The next best way is to **interview references**. Ask them the above questions about the training they have experienced in their organization.

Review materials the vendor has developed for other clients. Ask to see specific examples of custom work, keeping in mind that the content and the look of the materials will vary from project to project depending on the specifications of that particular client. Beware if everything you see looks exactly alike, as that is often a sign that the training is not really custom-designed. For example, some vendors may simply put a client’s name on the cover page of their generic training manual, while the inside materials and the actual training content remain the same from project to project.

Finally, **trust your own experience** and intuition. Just as no generic training can “fit all,” no one training company is right for everyone. When you find the training company, and the trainers, who “fit” with you, your needs, your culture, you will have found a gem beyond price. Because no matter how glitzy the alleged competition, you can only build a lasting relationship with the organization that will help you reach your goals in the way most comfortable for you.