

Kevin Minor: 0:03

Greetings and welcome to the NASPO Pulse. You are listening to our 10th episode. This is the podcast where we are monitoring issues in state procurement. We've got our finger on the pulse. I'm your host, Kevin Miner, and I am excited to be greeting you from the NASPO headquarters in Lexington, Kentucky, for the 10th but not the last time.

Kevin Minor: 0:24

So many exciting things coming up soon, folks, at the forefront of which is NASPO's first ever virtual conference. For those of you who don't know, the REACH conference or the Regional Education and Connection Hub conference brings together procurement staff from all regions of the country. Its purpose is to expand the sharing of education, best practices and innovative experiences. Obviously, the conference is virtual this year to keep everyone safe and healthy. So on today's episode we're talking with Lori Brown of Lori Brown Communications. You may have caught her at a NASPO conference or on a NASPO webinar before. Lori Brown has been doing speaking and training for over 20 years. She's a certified speaking professional and certified virtual presenter. We're looking to gain some insight and best practices, not only for those attending a virtual training, but those that have encountered designing a training for the first time for their office as well. Let's take the pulse, Lori. Thank you so much for joining me today. How are you?

Laurie Brown: 1:29

I am great, so glad, to be here with you. Thank you.

Kevin Minor: 1:32

I am so glad that you agreed to talk with us. So, Lori, let's talk about your background just a little bit. How did you get into this field and what's some of your experience?

Laurie Brown: 1:41

So I started out as an actor way back. Really, yeah, it was fun. I've done movies, I've done commercials.

Laurie Brown: 1:49

I've done a lot of training films, and it was during the time I was doing training films for the automotive industry that one day somebody said, hey, can you go do that live? And I said, yeah, and that's how I started really becoming a trainer, was moving from video when we used to do a lot of video training to live training, and so I did that for a number of years and then started creating my own content and have worked all over the world doing training. So it's been quite a fun ride.

Kevin Minor: 2:23

It sounds like it and, honestly, after talking with you a couple times, I'm really not that surprised that you were an actor at one point. So, Laurie, just briefly discuss was it difficult to start creating your own content?

Laurie Brown: 2:40

You know, I think what happened and I do a lot. I still am educating myself all the time. So, yeah, it was a change from doing other people's material to my own, but I had help from a lot of really smart people who trained me and I've learned a lot along the way, but every year I'll take a training class to learn something that I didn't know before. So it's always building on itself.

Kevin Minor: 3:11

So it's always good to continue your education, your experience.

Laurie Brown: 3:15

I think it's essential because we learn new things. There's new things that people are doing. There's things that we're discovering now that we didn't know 20 years ago.

Kevin Minor: 3:26

Right.

Laurie Brown: 3:26

And so, yeah, I believe that anybody who wants to train other folks should be constantly training themselves, going in and getting certified or going through workshops. It's really important.

Kevin Minor: 3:39

Sure, and that's an interesting point that you bring up about we're constantly coming up with new theories, new ways of training, and that's an interesting point that you bring up about. We're constantly coming up with new theories, new ways of training, and it's almost like we're even correcting some of the material or the avenues. Would you say that that's probably true.

Laurie Brown: 3:56

Without question, we understand the brain better now and we understand how people learn. But even with that, who we were 20 years ago is not who we are now. Our attention spans are shorter. We get used to certain things because what the world has shown us and the training has to really represent that.

Kevin Minor: 4:20

You have a lot of experience, virtual learning and training. I'd like to talk just a little bit about some of those best practices. What's your experience with training from the back of the room? We know that that's a well-known train-the-trainer program that you're certified in.

Laurie Brown: 4:37

So I did training from the back of the room. It's Sharon Baumann's work. It is brilliant. I don't think anybody understands training the way she does and that was a great face-to-face program and it works beautifully and it's the backbone of everything I do in training. But now we have to move the world into virtual. So training from the back of room, everything that she has taught us still is relevant, but it's used differently in virtual.

Kevin Minor: 5:11

So what exactly does training from the back of the room mean?

Laurie Brown: 5:13

So her theory is that it really needs to be more about the participant and less about you. So it's not you getting up in front of a group of people lecturing to them.

Laurie Brown: 5:28

It's really about engaging them and, as I said, using brain science to make sure that your learning sticks. And she has these six trumps that are brilliant and when you use them in training it totally changes everything. So she believes moving trumps sitting. What that means is you don't want people stuck in their chairs for eight hours or six hours. People need to be up and moving. The oxygen is really good for our brains and the movement is really important. Talking trumps listening, and what she means by that is having the participants do more talking and less listening. Different trumps, same. We know the brain turns off anywhere between 10 and 20 minutes if things don't change.

Laurie Brown: 6:18

So, you have to change something to wake up the brain again. Shorter trumps longer. As I said, our attention spans are getting shorter and shorter, absolutely.

Laurie Brown: 6:29

And so when you can make them into little, bite-sized bits, it's always better. Images trump words. So not having a slide that has, you know, a thousand words on it, as I've seen, but having an image that you can talk about. And then writing trumps reading is her last one and that really has to do with having some sort of physical activity, either writing on a flip chart or on a participant guide. But getting hands in and moving works better than just somebody reading something sort of in a static way.

Kevin Minor: 7:06

One of the things that you talk about is making your learners feel safe in your courses, so what does that mean and why is that so important?

Laurie Brown: 7:15

I think anytime somebody is in a training situation, there's lots of opportunities to feel unsafe.

Laurie Brown: 7:23

You might think, well, I'm going to say something, I'm going to look stupid, maybe somebody will criticize me if I take a risk.

Laurie Brown: 7:30

My boss could be watching, and so I think, in general, training can feel risky, and so what you need to do is create an environment where people can take risks where they like to talk about failing safely, because I think we learn a lot by not being perfect, and so even sometimes, when you might have the and I hate to even use this word but the wrong answer, it could be a great way to start a discussion that gets you more information than if you had been picture perfect along the way. So I like to set up a working agreement that keeps people safe, and there's some parts of it that I think are really important. I think everybody needs to have the right to pass, and what that means is, if you don't want to do an activity, for whatever reason, you should have the right to pass without anyone commenting. Now I'll be honest if somebody does a right to pass on every single activity, it's a time where I have to say Start asking questions.

Laurie Brown: 8:41

Right, but I'm going to do it quietly when we're on a break, is this? Really a place for you to be.

Kevin Minor: 8:47

So you don't put them in the spot.

Laurie Brown: 8:49

Never, never, do that, so I think that's very important. I think you need to let people know that it's a space that they can experiment in. I think it's also important to give people time to process. So I'm a quick processor. If you ask me a question, I can answer it pretty quickly, but there is probably half the world that likes to think about their answers before they spit them out. So you have to create activities that allow people time to process, and whether that's just giving them a minute to think about it or getting them in a small group to talk about it, that allows those folks that are processors a bit more safety.

Laurie Brown: 9:34

I like people to feel free to ask for help at any time, whether in front of the group or when we're on breaks. I love Elmo Elmo's my favorite thing breaks. I love Elmo Elmo's my favorite thing. This is where the entire group is tasked with keeping everything moving along and Elmo stands for enough, let's move on. If you have one participant going on a 20-minute turn to the left on something that wasn't relevant, the whole group can now say, yep, let's take an Elmo.

Kevin Minor: 10:10

That is a great tool.

Laurie Brown: 10:12

I don't think anyone should have any meetings without Elmo and you really have to set it up right, which is to say everybody has the right to call Elmo. Now I've seen in groups that you know you have people who are high up in the hierarchy and people who are lower who might not feel comfortable telling the president or the CEO or the director, hey, elmo, but that's the facilitator's job because they can say you know, I'm seeing an Elmo here and if you're doing something on Zoom, you can empower people to private message you an Elmo.

Laurie Brown: 10:51

So I wouldn't then say oh, jack is calling an Elmo. I would just say I got an Elmo, let's check with the group. Raise your hand if you think we need to move on.

Kevin Minor: 11:02

And Elmo is a term. It's not so negative, right? It's not something so jarring that you have to stand up and say, hey, will you shut up already and let's move on. It's a much more polite way.

Laurie Brown: 11:14

Yeah, and it's even acknowledging that we had enough which is in some ways a positive thing right Enough. Let's move on.

Kevin Minor: 11:22

Yeah, I think there's a respectful way.

Laurie Brown: 11:24

Yeah.

Kevin Minor: 11:25

Respectful way to do that Wow.

Laurie Brown: 11:27

I love it both virtually and in person. Just so, if I was going to give one piece of advice again never have a meeting without Elmo. Set it up at the beginning, give people the power to call it and then let them do it.

Kevin Minor: 11:43

So we talked about feeling safe in the training. How do you do that virtually? Is that different or is it basically the same?

Laurie Brown: 11:51

It's going to be the same, so it's still setting up a working agreement. In some ways. Some of it is having people have enough knowledge to use the equipment. So at the beginning, some people aren't familiar with Zoom. They don't know where the chat is or how to make reactions, or if I'm using a third-party app like Miro or Mural. It gives them some time to play with it so that they can catch up. I was in a training class and we were using a I think it was a Miro board and I had no idea where I was or what to do and, I have to be honest, I felt stupid. And so you need that time to get everybody comfortable on the equipment, whatever that means, and then they can feel safe in using it.

Kevin Minor: 12:44

So you felt you felt kind of antiquated to the equipment and then I guess you probably didn't feel comfortable asking right, because everybody was moving on Right, everybody was moving on.

Laurie Brown: 12:54

I had no idea. I was trying to catch up and I eventually did, but you probably missed a lot of content, though. Oh, exactly Because I was so worried about where am I on this board and how do I move it. And that could be taken care of even before a training by having some tutorial videos that just say you're going to be using this here's where to find this, here's where to find this, here's where you go for that. Right, and then everybody's on an even playing field.

Kevin Minor: 13:26

Okay, so. So leave it up to the attendee, in so many words, to prepare themselves.

Laurie Brown: 13:32

Well, you have to provide them the information.

Kevin Minor: 13:34

Okay.

Laurie Brown: 13:35

So I would create a video that shows them a little tutorial video, just to watch this. Or I might say go play with this, here's your assignment, Because some people prefer to learn just by doing so. If that's the way they like to learn, I might send them on to a board and say oh, it's a scavenger hunt, Find this, find that find this Make it interactive, make it fun.

Kevin Minor: 14:01

Yeah, yeah, why not? So that kind of goes with. My next question is how do you make people comfortable, assimilate them to that virtual learning? I know we kind of already covered that because you said you know, prepare them, give them everything that they need to allow themselves to prepare to use whatever software platform is being used. But how else do you get people comfortable in a virtual environment?

Laurie Brown: 14:28

Again some of the same things you do live, which is you have them introduce themselves to each other. I always like to ask how do you feel about being here? Because then if somebody says, well, okay, you kind of go all right, so now we know they may need some extra caregiving. If you have a good platform and if you have good instructions, it should be invisible.

Kevin Minor: 14:54

Okay.

Laurie Brown: 14:54

So nobody should think well, like I thought the other day when I felt stupid using something, nobody should be noticing any of the tools. They should just be able to start using them. And when I use Adobe Connect, which I love, you kind of force people into different rooms and different platforms and different kind of layouts, but they don't even see it. They just end up being there. So it's far less for them to have to worry about. They just get immersed in the experience. With Zoom, there's a little bit more that you have to handhold them through and oftentimes again, I'd like people to come on 15 minutes early and we can play with things if there's something that they might not be comfortable with.

Kevin Minor: 15:48

Do you find that the face-to-face or the video aspect is helpful in a virtual learning setting?

Laurie Brown: 15:55

Absolutely, and I know there are people that talk about safety who don't like to be on camera.

Kevin Minor: 16:01

Right.

Laurie Brown: 16:02

And so they won't do it again. Right to pass, they have the right to do it. But when we can look at somebody else's face, if we can see their facial expressions, if we can see their body language, it really does help. When you have large groups you can't do it, so it really has to be a smaller group of people. If nothing else. The facilitator should be on camera.

Kevin Minor: 16:27

Yeah, yeah. I can't tell you how many times I've been on just a phone meeting conversation with other people and everybody wants to talk at once, because you can't see each other trying to interject or trying to speak or I can't tell how the other person is in taking the information that I'm sending to them.

Laurie Brown: 16:45

And so that's absolutely right. In meetings, if you're going to just be on the phone, you need a facilitator, and then the facilitator would say who needs to speak next, or call out on folks or maybe even have a way that you can private message them to say I'd like to speak, and that way it has more order and people don't feel like they're being talked over.

Kevin Minor: 17:12

Sure, and it feels so industrial. It's almost like a Lord of the Flies kind of thing where I have the conch right, but it's needed right when you get to a certain amount of people and you get to a certain amount of information. Get to a certain amount of people, you get a certain amount of information, levels of complexity. You need that facilitator, that person that's going to say OK, I am controlling the conversation and needs to go through me in order to make sure that we don't get an Elmo.

Laurie Brown: 17:39

Right, and that we don't go off topic and that we don't waste people's time and that we don't have people repeating what they had said before just because they want to. So yeah, I think facilitators are really important in meetings.

Kevin Minor: 17:56

Right, well, and giving the facilitator, the agency, to be able to control the meeting. So and unfortunately, we have to talk about the global pandemic a little bit. I'd like to keep that in the peripheral for our interview as much as possible, but I do want to ask you more. People are working from home and because of this, we're finding new and innovative ways to distribute information and learn online. We talked about this a little bit, but what are some of the best practices that you have found that may be helpful to our listeners who are either designing or taking online training?

Laurie Brown: 18:33

Absolutely. I think we have to really be aware that there is fatigue. Right now they call it Zoom fatigue, but in general I think we get fatigued easier when it is virtual, and so we have to make sure we give breaks where people can move. I'll do a break for 10 minutes where you have to get away from your computer. You have to step away from it, get a beverage, use a bio break and to do that at least every hour. People need that time to kind of get away from it. And even when you are doing the session, have some movement there, even in silly ways where you know if you agree with me, get closer to the camera. Disagree, go farther away from the camera. Use a hand gesture. That shows how much you agree with something. Five I fully agree, one I don't agree. So finding a way to

get movement in there is really important to keep people comfortable.

Kevin Minor: 19:42

All right, that goes back to your trumps, right, that's absolutely with the trumps.

Laurie Brown: 19:46

That's why they fit so well. And you might think well, movement that's harder when it's virtual, and I think it is.

Kevin Minor: 19:54

Yeah.

Laurie Brown: 19:54

But then you start getting innovative and finding ways to get people to move. The assignment might be find something in your space that's a metaphor for what we're talking about, and so people come back with an object and then they have to describe what's that metaphor, and it's kind of a fun way to get movement in and have them be able to talk about it.

Kevin Minor: 20:19

So, in doing my research for our conversation, one thing that I ran across was setting expectations. So how exactly do you set expectations for that virtual? And, like you said, you want to make the expectations that you're setting. You want to make those achievable, right? There's no way that we're all going to sit here for two hours, two and a half hours, and try to learn and read everywhere on the screen. So how do you set those expectations at the beginning of an online session?

Laurie Brown: 20:49

I think it's always good, like in any training, to have objectives of learning. What are people going to leave being able to do? I don't like agendas so much, because I like it to be a little more fluid but, sometimes agendas work very well.

Laurie Brown: 21:05

You set up those working agreements so everybody feels safe. You spend some time letting them get to know each other and have them. More importantly than me setting my objectives. I want to know what their objectives are. So I always ask in classes what are you hoping to leave with what skill, what tool, what bit of knowledge? Every time we put it in the learner's lap, they take ownership that way. So instead of having them passively get force fed whatever I want them to learn, if I can get them to tell me what's important to them, then they're far more engaged.

Kevin Minor: 21:53

Interesting and you use the word engaging. It sounds like you use a lot of games and a lot of fun activities in your trainings, and I've seen you use a couple different games, so I mean you found that that's been helpful too.

Laurie Brown: 22:00

I think again, we have to change things up. So it can't be I can tell you this no matter what, it can't be you lecturing for two hours.

Kevin Minor: 22:10

Right.

Laurie Brown: 22:11

Because it is an invitation to go play words with friends or check email. People need to be touching their keyboard or reacting at least every five to ten minutes.

Kevin Minor: 22:24

Oh, wow.

Laurie Brown: 22:25

So it's far more than when it's live. There's a little bit more time you can do. When it's alive you can maybe do 20 minutes.

Kevin Minor: 22:35

Right.

Laurie Brown: 22:35

When it's virtual, you have far less time.

Kevin Minor: 22:38

Five minutes, that's ambitious.

Laurie Brown: 22:40

Well, not really, if you think about always making it about them and learner-centric. So I can talk to you for 20 minutes on a topic, but how much better if I say tell me what you know about this topic, tell me everything you all know about it. Now I'm getting into the knowledge base of the group. They feel more engaged because they're sharing their knowledge. They're not just being passive observers. They're essential to making the learning stick. So it really isn't that hard. You can use a poll, you can have a chat question, you can have them reply in any number of ways. So it sounds daunting, but it really isn't.

Kevin Minor: 23:25

I want to talk a little bit about the design and delivery, because you can't have a virtual training or training at all without the design and then delivering it to your attendees. So what does designing training for the biggest impact look like? For you.

Laurie Brown: 23:44

So there are different modalities and there are folks that prefer to learn visually and folks that prefer to learn through listening and folks that like to get their hands in and folks that like some time to process before they speak. And you need to design training for all of it. I mean it's really, it's all important it I mean it's really, it's all important. What I find is one of the things that Sharon talks about is the four C's and she designs all of her program using this. So the four C's are connections, concepts, concrete practice and conclusions.

Laurie Brown: 24:24

So connections are what do you already know about this topic? And, as I talked about that before, always kind of seek out the knowledge in the room. Then you can share what are the concepts that people need to learn, then give them time to practice it and then in conclusions you can have celebrations, you can talk about future ways to use this. Using the four Cs helps really keep all participants active and learning throughout it. And what's interesting about design and delivery? I have delivered really badly designed programs that I've made better through the delivery Right that I've made better through the delivery.

Laurie Brown: 25:08

Right, and I have seen really well-designed programs become terrible because of the delivery. So if I had to say which was more important, design or delivery, maybe delivery.

Kevin Minor: 25:23

Really.

Laurie Brown: 25:24

I know, but it also means that the person delivering may be redesigning on the spot, so maybe that's not fair.

Kevin Minor: 25:33

So, Lori, before we let you go, do you have any advice for our listeners out there? I know in this world we may not be having meetings in the same room or be able to see the person speaking. What are some of the specific tips people can use to make themselves better listeners? And especially, we have a virtual conference coming up and it's the first time we've ever done a virtual conference. Can you tell our listeners how to make themselves better listeners?

Laurie Brown: 26:01

First and foremost, turn off all electronics, turn off your email, turn off your phones not on silent, because silent even if it vibrates. You're going to look at that.

Kevin Minor: 26:17

Right.

Laurie Brown: 26:17

Or you're going to, your focus will take to that. So that's the first thing Give the virtual space your undivided attention. For me, what that also means is I always have something to write on, because I tend to focus better if I'm taking notes, and I think that's important. But my best bit of advice I learned from the Mr Rogers movie. I don't know if you saw that with Tom Hanks.

Kevin Minor: 26:45

The one with Tom Hanks, yeah.

Laurie Brown: 26:47

Yeah, it was beautiful. And Tom Hanks, as Mr Rogers says to the reporter, do you know who the most important person in the world to me is right now? And the guy's kind of like this tough old reporter and he said no, I don't know. And he said you are, because I'm talking to you right now. And if we listened to everybody as if they were the most important person in the world, you automatically become a better listener and this is an important thing. Whether you're talking about listening to somebody on a Zoom call or in a meeting, it works at home. I mean, how often for me, when I heard that, I realized I don't even listen to my husband, who is arguably one of the two most important people in my life, and sometimes I don't listen to him as if he's the most important person. But when you start out listening to somebody making that statement to yourself, I guarantee you will listen better.

Kevin Minor: 27:53

Lori Brown. Owner of Lori Brown Communications. It was my pleasure speaking with you today.

Laurie Brown: 27:59

I really enjoyed speaking with you also and if anyone out there has questions or concerns, they can email me or call me. I love NASPO, would love to help out. They shouldn't hesitate.

Kevin Minor: 28:12

Excellent, and we love you just as much, and I'll make sure that we put all your contact information in the bio for this podcast.

Laurie Brown: 28:20

Sounds great.

Kevin Minor: 28:22

Lori, thank you so much for joining me today.

Laurie Brown: 28:24

Thank you.

Kevin Minor: 28:27

What a great conversation. You can really tell she's had a lot of experience in the training sphere. Like she said, we need to go in prepared, have learning objectives, be interactive, set up working agreements so people feel safe and let them get to know one another. More importantly, learn what the attendees want to leave the training with. If you are the attendee, reach, be prepared. Be prepared before you go in the virtual environment and have an idea of what you want to gain from attending what skill, tools, bit of knowledge. Like Lori said, when you put it in the learner's lap, they take ownership of the training. It becomes theirs. They are far more engaged.

Kevin Minor: 29:17

What do you think? Has your office had to switch completely to a virtual environment? Have you had to design or deliver a training recently? Let us know. Email us with your questions and comments at podcast@naspo.org. That does it for us on the Pulse today. If you haven't already, make sure you subscribe to us on Apple Podcasts, spotify, google or wherever you get them. Listeners, you do not want to be the only guy or gal who didn't take the Pulse. Make sure to check out our blog, pulsenaspo.org, and catch up on your weekly dose of procurement research written by your very own NASPO staff. I'm Kevin Miner. Until next time, thank you.