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In-Service Training: Beauty or Boredom

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Keeping aquatic staff at a peak level of knowledge and performance is a difficult task. Announce an in-service training and suddenly calendars are double booked, and grim faces greet the news. “It’s THAT time again?” is an oft-heard response. A good in-service training can be an event of beauty. But, what makes the difference between a tedious, boring, waste of time event and a challenging, exciting, rejuvenating experience? Finding out can make, literally, the difference between life and death for your participants.

No one can argue with the need to keep knowledge and skills current when working in the aquatic medium. Yes, emergencies can occur at any time, whether staff is ready for them or not. As a result, staff readiness for emergency response is a 24/7 priority. Lack of readiness can cost a life.

Types of In-service Training*

There are a variety of formats for in-service training. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. Included are skills training, lecture, video training, and scenarios.

Skills training – participants are required to perform the emergency response skills they might reasonably need to perform in the type of emergency situations which are foreseeable for their facility and client base. For example, if your client base includes individuals who are diabetic, recognizing and responding to diabetic emergencies is foreseeable and all staff should be trained in responding to a diabetic emergency. On the other hand, if your pool ranges in depth from 2’ to 4’, staff should be trained to bring an unconscious individual up from 4’ of water. Staff does not need to be trained to bring an unconscious individual up from 15’ feet of water. During skills training, skills may be practiced individually, or in combination with other skills that might be part of emergency response.

Lecture training – participants are required to listen to a leader teach or review emergency response protocols. The lecture may be accompanied by Powerpoint or flip chart visual aids. Participants may ask questions for clarification.

Video training – participants are required to watch a video presentation either as a review of prior training, or as an update, presenting new or additional information. Videos may also contain situations showing emergency response, giving an example of application of knowledge and skills or providing an example that may contain errors – inviting critique of the viewing participants.

Scenario training – participants are required to participate in working through a situation and reaching a conclusion which is then evaluated against standard of practice criterion. Working through a situation may be in the form of discussion or in the form of actual role-playing where response skills are acted out.

Notice, for the description of each form of in-service, the term “required” appears in the content. In-service training is for everyone. No matter how experienced a staff member is, no matter how long he or she has been on the job or in a specific position, review of emergency response knowledge and skills is appropriate and should be mandatory. No exceptions.

The no exceptions policy also means all staff members having any contact with the aquatic program. In-service training for emergency response should include not only the pool staff, but also desk/reception staff (they may have to call for or direct arrival of EMS), maintenance staff (they may have to implement contagion precautions during clean-up after an emergency, plus they are usually responsible for pool maintenance), locker/dressing room staff (they may need to assist in an emergency), and supervisory staff (as they may have to evaluate the response readiness).

Because in-service training should be mandatory, it is very important each training be creative, attention getting, and stimulating. Attending the training should be worth the time spent. Wasting the time of an aquatic professional breeds boredom and inattention and the entire purpose of the in-service training is defeated.

Comparisons of Training Protocols

Which in-service training model is right for your staff? Probably all of the above. Each has value, but that value is dependant on the characteristics of your staff, as well as the specific needs of your program. Here are some advantages and disadvantages of each.

<i>Method</i>	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Skills Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very good for entry-level staff. Knowledge without skills will not bring good result. Even someone who has a certification may not have a skill level appropriate for his or her current job. Find out through in-service training. • Recertification in CPR/AED/FA, and lifeguarding is, in part, based on skill performance. So practice of skills aids certification. • Very useful for staff immediately following a life-threatening emergency. Skills training can assist staff in regaining confidence and reaffirming skills, an important component of avoiding PTSD. • Participation can be easily documented. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills training can become repetitive and boring. • Skills without implementation knowledge also will not be effective in an emergency.
Lecture Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful for providing everyone with the exact knowledge at the same time. Probably the most time-efficient method. • Useful for working with large groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With nothing interesting to look at and nothing to actually do, lectures can put people to sleep. There is no way to know whether or not people are focusing on the lecture. • Lecture is PASSIVE for participants.
Video Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful for providing emergency situation situations for analysis. • Useful for working with large groups. • Practical for presenting update information on skills. Everyone sees the same demonstration, so there can be no doubt on how a technique is done. • Video presentations remove individual instructor bias from the presentation and eliminate the possibility of an instructor digressing from the topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People today are so used to watching screen presentations that it is easy to lose focus of attention. • Presentations rely on use of technology. • Video training is PASSIVE for participants.

Scenario Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be customized based on needs of staff or specific program situations. • Variety is a component of scenario training. No two scenarios need to be the same. With each new situation, different knowledge and skills will come into play. • Scenarios can be customized each and every time, while video and skills training remain constant. • Scenarios are ACTIVE involvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scenarios take more time to plan and execute. • Initially, participants may need to overcome reluctance to participate for fear of making mistakes.
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In-service trainings should be held on a regularly scheduled basis, and at least quarterly. More often if special circumstances arises. Which in-service training method is really best? All of the above, depending on the circumstances. At the start of the season or new year, everyone should participate in skills review and/or recertification. Following an emergency, the same is true. When rescue protocols are revised, Lecture and/or video training may be used to present the new material, followed by skills training to put into practice what has been presented. Scenario training is valuable at any time. A quick scenario, at the start, end, or central focus of an in-service training gives everyone a chance to apply knowledge and skills. Scenarios are that final blend of training that ends boredom and adds beauty to all mandatory in-service trainings.

*For additional information on and suggested activities for in-service training, reference Grosse, S. (2009). *Lifeguard Training Activities and Games*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.