

Rethinking How We Train in Meat Processing

By David Zarling, NMPAN Program Manager

A wise plant manager once posed to me the following exchange between she and the owner of the plant she managed:

Plant Owner: “What if we spend all of this money to train these people and they take their skills elsewhere?”

Plant Manager: “What if we don’t spend that time and money training them, and they *stay*?”

Most team trainings fail – not because workers are lazy or incapable, but because the training was never built for how adults actually learn or for the real work they do. In the world of small, federally inspected meat processing plants, that’s a costly failure. Mistakes compound. Turnover spikes. Morale tanks. And production suffers.

Here’s the problem: Trainers, whether they’re plant owners, managers, or consultants—too often try to teach from paper, PowerPoint, or just a brief verbal conversation and rarely leverage the way adults learn to promote retention and buy-in.

If you want a crew that works smarter, not just harder, it’s time to ditch the “information dump” approach. Replace it with learning that’s hands-on, collaborative, and centered around real-world problems. That’s how you build a competent, confident team that actually retains what they’re taught and applies it every day.

Let Workers Be the Experts

One of the biggest mistakes trainers make is talking at people instead of involving them. Adults bring experience, even if it’s not formal. If your training ignores that, you lose them before you start.

People call me when they’re starting up a plant or when they have a plant that’s underperforming. I often walk into situations where I’m a stranger, and nobody trusts me yet. What I’ve found is that the fastest way to foster buy-in is genuine curiosity. I make space for their expertise. I ask questions. I listen. Then I show them that their feedback is shaping the approach in real time.

Remember – the rest of the manufacturing world already recognizes that the answers to issues or training shortcomings exist with the operators – not the manager’s brain.

That approach flips the dynamic. Workers stop feeling like targets and start feeling like contributors. That’s when they start learning.

Why Activity-Based Training Works Better

When we train adults—especially in fast-paced, high-consequence environments like meat processing plants—we need more than just good intentions. We need methods that are grounded in how the adult brain actually takes in, stores, and retrieves information.

That's where activity-based learning strategies come in. These aren't gimmicks or trends—they're backed by decades of adult learning research, including some of the most thoughtful work in sustainable agriculture education. When applied well, they lead to better retention, stronger engagement, and real behavior change on the plant floor.

The following five practices represent the most effective, research-backed ways to structure learning experiences that actually work—for adults doing real work in the real world.

Five Adult Learning Best Practices

These five best practices have been a complete game changer for me as a Plant Manager and Team Training consultant.

1. **Make Content Relatable**

Adults connect new knowledge to what they already know. Build on prior experiences, even if informal, to create bridges to new skills. Use analogies, real examples, and familiar tools to make abstract ideas stick.

2. **Engage Positive Emotions**

People remember what they *feel*. Joy, curiosity, recognition and surprise help adults retain knowledge and solve problems creatively. Design training moments that trigger curiosity, discovery, and shared wins—while avoiding fear, frustration, and embarrassment. Have you ever been in a high school or college math class and felt embarrassed to ask a question? That's the dynamic we're talking about. It shuts down the learning circuits in the brain.

3. **Give Learners Choice**

Choice fosters ownership. Whether it's choosing a learning format (demo vs. discussion), picking the problem to solve, or deciding how to show progress, giving adults agency in how they learn increases engagement and motivation.

4. **Identify Mental Models**

Adults bring assumptions, bias and experiences, all accumulated by their personal backgrounds—accurate or not—that shape how they interpret new information. These “mental models” can speed up learning or block it entirely. Effective training surfaces these assumptions early and uses them to guide instruction.

5. **Provide Practice and Application**

Nothing beats doing. Adults need time to practice new skills, then apply them to solve real problems in their work. This reinforces memory, builds competence, and bridges the gap between theory and performance. Teach a concept, show visual

examples and then task the crew with actually practicing the skill – this is truly what sets the lesson in stone.

Learning Outcome-Based Training: Why It Works

If you want to create training that truly sticks, you need to start with clear, focused learning outcomes. Rather than dumping information on your team in a one-size-fits-all approach, a learning outcome-based model is focused, practical, and effective.

Benefits of Learning Outcome-Based Training:

- **Focuses learning efforts** on what truly matters.
- **Increases clarity** for both trainer and learner—what’s expected and what needs to be achieved.
- **Promotes engagement** by tying learning to specific, measurable results.
- **Builds confidence** because learners know exactly what they’ll be able to do once the training is over.

How to Select 2–3 Learning Outcomes per Training Subject

The key to success in this approach is **simplicity**. Instead of trying to teach everything about a topic (e.g., a broad subject like “safety” or “sanitation”), break it down to just 2–3 key outcomes that you want your learners to be able to demonstrate. Here’s how:

1. **What do you want them to *do*?**
For instance, instead of teaching *all* of HACCP, aim for an outcome like: “By the end of this session, learners will be able to identify critical control points in the raw fabrication room”, or, “All supervisors will be able to create their own GMP and PPE checklist by the end of this training”
2. **Keep it measurable:**
Select outcomes that can be assessed with a simple demonstration or performance. “Being able to clean equipment thoroughly” is very vague; “Foam, scrub, rinse and sanitize the vacuum stuffer so that no fat, visible protein or detectable ATP are present, all within 20 minutes” is very easy to measure.
3. **Be specific:**
Avoid vague outcomes like “understand” or “know.” Focus on what learners should *demonstrate* or *apply*.

Pairing Learning Activities with Each Outcome

Now, here's where the magic happens: **pairing each learning outcome with an activity.**

Adults learn best when they *do*—not when they passively listen to lectures or read slides. In meat processing, for example, a demonstration of knife safety or proper temperature monitoring is far more valuable than just explaining it. Here's how to make it stick:

- **For every learning outcome, create an activity.**
If the outcome is “learners will be able to clean equipment thoroughly,” the activity could be an in-the-field cleaning challenge, where they identify and fix common issues. Let them practice, then review their work together. If the outcome is “team members will be able to demonstrate antimicrobial application at final rail in accordance to our supporting documentation”, you might have the team practice applying lactic or acetic acid to beef carcasses in the holding cooler, while another team member audits it with the CCP summary form your HACCP plan in-hand.
- **Make it hands-on.**
Use real-world scenarios and materials—whether it's handling actual tools or managing real production data. Adults need to connect theory to action to remember it.
- **Let them reflect.**
After each activity, give them a moment to discuss what worked, what didn't, and why. Reflection deepens understanding and helps them apply lessons to future tasks.

Build Reflection Into the Routine

From education research to my own field experience, the message is clear: people retain knowledge better when they use it immediately and then reflect on it. But we rarely build that into plant operations.

This doesn't mean formal debriefs or adding hours to the day. It can be as simple as a 10-minute shift huddle: “What went wrong with the trim today?” or “What helped us stay ahead of schedule?” Let the crew talk it out. Let them solve problems together.

Over time, that reflection loop creates a culture where learning is part of the job—not something bolted on after the fact.

Start Small, Build Smart

You don't need to overhaul everything at once. In fact, you shouldn't. Pick one part of your process. Build a simple, outcome-based training module around it. Define what “done” looks like. Use an activity to reinforce it. And revisit it regularly.

Good training takes time up front—but it saves far more time later. Go slow to go fast.

Learning Is a Sustainability Strategy

We talk a lot about sustainable agriculture and local food systems. But you can't have a sustainable business if your workforce is constantly turning over or burning out.

Effective training is part of your sustainability strategy. It's not a side project. It's not an HR checkbox. It's how you build the kind of workplace where people want to stay—and where they're equipped to help the business grow.

What You Can Do Next

1. **Rethink your training model.** Move away from lectures and toward learning-outcome-based training. For every key skill, ask: "What do I want them to be able to do?" Then build an activity to match.
2. **Use real-world problems.** Don't invent case studies—use your own process data, mistakes, and crew feedback as training fuel.
3. **Build in reflection.** Add short check-ins or huddles that give people space to talk through what's working and what isn't.
4. **Ask for help.** Organizations like [NMPAN](#) have resources, tools, and peer support to help you do this right. Don't go it alone.
5. **Stop treating training like an afterthought.** Budget for it. Plan for it. Track results. The return on investment—retention, safety, quality, throughput—is absolutely worth it.

Final Word

Having the mindset to learn and retain knowledge requires a bit of trust. And no one—outside of dangerous situations—learns anything when they don't trust their instructor.

If you want to run a stronger plant, start by teaching like you mean it. Respect your crew. Build on what they know. Give them a stake in the process. And train for keeps – this will affect your bottom line and open doors for top line growth more than anything.