

The Art of Subbing

Positively prepare your class for a substitute before you need one.

Your goal as a group fitness leader is to provide consistent, predictable service in each experience you create. However, when circumstances prevent you from being able to appear in your regularly scheduled time slot, responsibility for creating positive experiences falls on substitute teachers, commonly called “subs.” When this occurs, the question arises, “Will the sub teach as well as the regular instructor?” The following tips will help you prepare yourself and your class participants for a positive experience in a non-ideal situation.

Tip 1: Embrace Change

When teaching your regular classes, try to frequently introduce at least one unexpected element to keep participants’ minds open to change, even if this means pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. Changing even the most seemingly insignificant detail can help each workout experience take on a fresh feeling so that participants’ minds stay open.

Experiment with

- adjusting the lighting,
- playing a different genre of music,
- dressing differently,
- laying out equipment differently (such as changing the direction of yoga mats),
- ordering your exercises differently, and
- teaching from different parts of the room.

These suggestions introduce healthy, different elements into the teaching atmosphere. The more often you make little changes without sacrificing your own style, the better you prepare students to flow with other changes, such as a substitute instructor teaching your class.



Subbing as a Cross-Training Experience

Subbing can be a great way to introduce the concept of cross-training. Remind students to stay open-minded to the value of training the body in different ways. “The more you train the body in the same way,” I always tell my students, “the less it responds

over time. So we really need to change things up.” When your students have the opportunity to experience a sub, encourage them to view this as cross-training for both their minds (as a new experience and style) *and* their bodies (as different kinds of physical

stimuli). Remind students that there are multiple ways to achieve fitness goals. Reminding people that “to get what you’ve never had, sometimes you have to do what you’ve never done” keeps them both open-minded and polite toward substitutes.

Tip 2: Prepare Your Substitutes

I am often surprised by the number of teachers who know they will need a substitute but wait until just a few days before the class date to start searching for one. The earlier you seek your own subs, the better your chances of finding one and preparing him or her. Time permitting, invite those who will sub for you to attend your class and experience the style you normally use in that time slot. As you begin your search, ask regular students to suggest other instructors whose classes they have enjoyed. Often your students will have good suggestions, and perhaps those other instructors would be a good “fit” to take your place.

When you do find subs, arm them with information, including important details we often take for granted, such as

- class size;
- whether or not there are classes immediately before and after yours;
- your general format;
- information about how the room’s equipment may affect the class, such as “The iPod® connection is broken, so prepare a backup CD,” or “There usually are more people than steps”;
- what kind of music you normally play (this is extremely valuable information in music-dependent classes like cycling);
- any notable regulars who may attend (e.g., “Watch for Connie in the front row who always wears pink and sets up your step for you”); and
- whether it is normal for some students to leave early.

Tip 3: Educate Students (Manners Matter)

Don’t overlook the value of a friendly reminder that it is in everyone’s best interest to be pleasant to subs. When I recently subbed a class for a high-profile instructor in New York City, I was pleasantly surprised when two students came to me before class and said, “We knew you were coming, and we love subs here, so you can relax and give us all you’ve got.” My guard went down, and I was able to create a positive experience because they were so open from the start. More important, however, is the positive, open-minded en-

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vironment this regular instructor fosters on a daily basis. Ask yourself what steps *you* can take to foster the same kind of positivism, such as

- reminding your regulars that they will get a better class if the substitute teacher is not scared or stressed;
- telling them that every substitute teacher deserves the benefit of the doubt;
- giving them the responsibility of showing what a positive environment you all share on a regular basis; and
- asking them to treat the substitute as they would want someone else’s class to treat *you*.

Tip 4: Support the Bigger Picture

Make a point of mentioning the names of other instructors in your facility or fitness chain from time to time. This shows that, even if your styles are distinctively different, you recognize them as valid, respected teachers. When they sub for you, your regulars will “recognize” them. Also, when other instructors attend your classes, be sure to point them out to everyone in a supportive way. When you return to the regular class and your students tell you how differently a sub may have taught, *never* openly criticize any particular approach. Regardless of your own feelings, exude your professionalism by *congratulating* them for trying something new. I use the ice cream metaphor to answer specific questions on “flavor”—most ice cream companies have to make a wide variety of flavors to satisfy everyone, and even *then* some people are lactose intolerant!

Tip 5: Hire From Within

Career growth is a part of every instructor’s responsibility, and part of this includes recruiting future talent. When there are students in the front row who you believe would be wonderful instructors, encourage them to take the professional steps to become certified.

Ultimately this ensures your own job security, because you’ll have substitute teachers who most emulate your style.

Tip 6: Use Electronic Communication Wisely

A current trend among instructors is to send out regular e-mails that announce special events in their professional lives. Many times, this includes announcements of when they will be *absent*. The *positive* aspect of this is that students whose minds are closed to attending classes taught by subs will most likely stay away and not create a negative atmosphere for those who *do* show up. The *negative* aspect of this is that news of your absence spreads by word of mouth, and very few students end up attending at all. If you choose to send out an e-mail to announce your absence, make sure you support the class, the time slot and the substitute. As long as you are teaching at a professional club, you have a responsibility to the overall schedule. Encouraging students to attend someone else’s class in your regular time slot shows how open-minded and nonthreatened you are, and shows that you genuinely care that they still get a workout in your absence.

It’s your responsibility as a group fitness leader to create daily experiences of open-mindedness. Prepare students to have the right mindset—to ensure that substitute teaching becomes a positive experience for all, regardless of who ends up teaching any particular class. ■

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