

# MISTAKES I MADE

Lessons From the  
Trenches Without  
a Guidebook

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Years ago when my father died from heart disease (1983), I took drastic steps to turn my life around from an unhealthy, sedentary lifestyle. I started on my road as a fitness leader at a time when there were no courses that prepared fitness professionals, no mentors to help avoid mistakes, and no certification preparation courses.

Embracing the world of fitness from having lost a father to heart disease and a brother to a heart attack, I learned a new behavioral strategy to leave behind an obese, sedentary lifestyle. When I began work as both a personal trainer and group fitness professional to share with others my passion for how I saved my own life, I learned more from the mistakes I made than from memorizing tidbits in books.

In the following account written in the first person, I humbly put before my *American Fitness* readers the biggest mistakes I made over the past 20 years, so that perhaps I can save others from doing the same.

## GROUP FITNESS

1. “Did you get a great workout?” I used to ask this of participants after every class, hoping they would stroke my developing fitness ego, claiming, “That was great.” Sometimes, however, their honesty hurt when participants said things such as, “It wasn’t hard enough,” or “I wasn’t feeling the intensity today.” I wanted to confirm that I had done everything right by creating the most appropriate experience for the strongest people in the class.

Lesson Learned: Instructors cannot take the responsibility for students’ intensity levels. I learned not to wait until the class is over to inquire about their intensity, but instead to say at the start of my class the statement: “An hour from now, I’m going to ask you if you chose the appropriate intensity today for *you*.”

Including that statement in the introduction reminds participants that the ultimate responsibility for intensity depends on

them. As their instructor, I am a certified professional who stays on top of trends by recertifying every two years with at least one AFAA program, maintains my continuing education, keeps my AFAA certifications current, and takes responsibility for my class programming. But I cannot be responsible for the overall intensity choices of my students.

2. “The level at this club is very low.” Truth be told, I used to categorize clubs by the abilities of the students. Driving to a club, I would review my game plan en route, aware of at which clubs I could do the most fancy bits of choreography. More often than not, the students in the front row were able to catch all of the nuances of the moves, sometimes even before I would introduce changes. When a few students would struggle to capture a move successfully, I used to secretly sigh, feeling bad for them, and continue teaching to the majority whose “level” matched the level on which I’d decided in my head while driving to the club.

**Lesson Learned:** The best instructors are true educators who can make a successful experience for all participants of any class. These days, with the abundance of multi-level classes, there are always at least a few individuals whose level may not match that of the majority, either by not meeting or surpassing expectations. The instructor who creates an environment in which each student feels successful has learned how to devise progressions and regressions—sometimes spontaneously—to make everyone feel like a part of the team by the end of class. If an instructor offers a tired boot camp participant (during a particularly aggressive burpee series) a regression of intensity by squatting and breathing, that client is more apt to feel successful rather than self-discovering that he cannot do it and stop moving all together, with a low self-image to boot.

## PERSONAL TRAINING

1. “Today we’re going to focus on this muscle group.” In making up my lesson plans for my clients, I used to develop routines based on the now dated approach of isolating muscle groups. I quickly learned that these isolation patterns were only appropriate for rehabilitation of specific issues because, as soon as my clients left me, they needed to use their muscles with integration for gross movement patterns in their activities of daily living.

**Lesson Learned:** Although a personal trainer’s preparation includes memorizing individual muscles and joint actions, this does NOT become a method for training clients. Instead, I learned to train movements over muscles, and function over physique. While there is nothing wrong with a client having a realistic goal of muscular hypertrophy, truly functional trainers learn to train movement patterns to integrate multi-planar movements that mimic what the clients need to be able to do during their work and play time.

2. “I’ll show you the way.” I used to show clients exercises that would help them reach their realistic goals faster. I used to love showing clients new movements with new pieces of equipment so they would react with the “wow” factor and avoid boredom. Interacting with them, I would be sure to point out how much they needed my coaching during a specific exercise.

**Lesson Learned:** The best trainers render themselves unnecessary by facilitating clients’ abilities to engage in independent movement, so I changed my approach 180 degrees. Abandoning the idea that my clients should depend on me, I adopted instead an approach that encouraged empowerment.

If I truly teach a movement pattern that is functionally necessary for my client, it is only a credit to me as a trainer if my client can eventually reproduce that movement successfully without me.

Of course, being needed as a spotter during a client’s loaded dead lift is very different from having taught a client how to execute simultaneous hip flexion and spinal flexion without me—the two essential simultaneous actions during this move. In the gym, I’m needed as a spotter, but my client’s need to bend over and execute a non-loaded dead lift to pick up something without me is crucial. Instead of the “I’ll show you the way” approach, I learned that the best trainers create independence in their clients by using the opposite approach of “You should eventually be able to *do* the way.”

## FOR BOTH GROUP EX AND PT:

“Don’t do it that way.” I used to cue and correct starting many sentences with “don’t.” While being negative in cueing may let some think that you have their best interests at heart, negative cueing actually keeps individuals from achieving desired behaviors quickly. Since any sentence that starts with “don’t” has to include the negative behavior in the same sentence, I learned to cue to the *solutions* instead of to the problems in order to bring about an overall positive experience with classes and clients.

**Lesson Learned:** The best educators use language exclusively in the positive realm. To get into that habit myself, I learned to use the word “keep.” Instead of cueing “Don’t hold your breath,” “Don’t let your knees go beyond your toes,” and “Don’t bend your wrists with the tubing,” for example, I created positive cues such as “Keep breathing,” “Keep your knees behind your toes in the squat,” and “Keep a neutral wrist.” This type of positive cueing elicits a faster response than waiting for clients to understand what you do not want first, and then trying to correct that. The best part about this technique is that it translates into most common languages, worldwide!

## IN CONCLUSION

Back in the last century as a fitness teacher, I used to think I was good because I had a following to my classes. When I began attending fitness conventions, I realized that I really did not know very much at all. Education humbled me, teaching me the difference between being a mere “trainer” and true “educator.” The preceding tips I humbly offer as some of the ways in which I have learned to embrace the latter. In both the personal training and group fitness environment each day, I find that the best educators continually teach what they need to learn, and, in so doing, learn what they need to teach.

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