



The SUB-ways of FITNESS


Creating Successful Experiences for
Substitute Teaching

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI

Group exercise experts strive to create the most professional and popular of experiences on a daily basis. Be that as it may, sometimes things go awry. While none of us plans to fail, it often happens that we fail to plan. Planning for emergencies includes the following "tips" regarding the topic of substitute teaching. "Subbing," as it is often referred to, is two-fold. First, it entails an understanding of what regularly scheduled instructors can do to be sure that their class is, indeed, "subbable." Second, it entails an understanding of what substitute instructors, themselves, can do to help guarantee a positive experience in the most potentially negative of circumstances.

Are You Replaceable?

None of us in group fitness wants to consider himself or herself replaceable. We spend a great deal of time finding our true style, voice and technique. To be sure, those elements of individuality are important, but when it comes time for a substi-



tute teacher to create a positive experience for the regular students in your absence, you need to be replaceable. Every group fitness director knows the frustration of having a special, signature class in a prime-time slot taught by one person, and how nearly impossible it is to find a replacement for that class without having to change the format almost entirely.

In order for others to be able to teach your class, you may wish to practice "social instructor networking." Once a month, schedule yourself to take someone else's class and then, in turn, invite that instructor to take your class. The result is two-fold. First, you become familiar with each other's style so that, in the event of having to "sub" a class for that instructor, you are already accustomed to the expectations of the students. Ultimately, this is good job security as you qualify yourselves to teach additional formats within your disciplines. Second, by introducing each other to the regular students in each other's classes, the students will be more apt to accept a sub they have already met.

Tip: Familiarize yourself with your colleague's approaches to different classes.

An overall method of teaching that includes periodic evolution and change keeps everyone's mind open to new things. Instructors who are indeed "replaceable" teach their clients the need for change, both for cross-training via different techniques and for fresh approaches. Even consistent, branded, pre-choreographed programs alter their workouts several times per year in the interest of change.

Tip: Truly the best instructors are very "subbable" because they have students with open minds from constantly being exposed to an abundance of ever-changing stimuli.

When requesting a substitute teacher, many instructors in their desperation for class coverage request the least common denominator: classes of strength, cardio or flexibility. This can do a disservice to the people expecting a specific format or specific equipment, however. For example, a desperate instructor recently asked me to sub a "Cardio Junkie" class. I thought the name was clever and that I would be able to do anything training the cardiovascular system. Unfortunately, when I arrived at the club, I found out that the class of 40 people was expecting the branded and equipment-based program "Urban Rebounding." Because I do not teach that format, I told everyone to put away their rebounders and that we would have a cardiovascular experience of floor-based movement. The original instructor should have requested a substitute teacher specifically for that formatted class.

When requesting a substitute teacher, please provide the prospective teachers with information from the following template.

Tip: Substitute Teaching Template

1. General Level of participants is:
2. General Expectations of participants are:
3. Format you generally teach (including what equipment you usually use; tell the sub what other equipment is available in this room):
4. Is there a class in the room immediately before this one or is it a quick transition? (There is little use trying to get to a class very early to introduce yourself and set out equipment if the room is occupied by another class until the very last moment anyway.)
5. What is the EXACT name of the class that appears on the schedule/board for this class?
6. (Cycle only: what kind of music do they particularly LOVE/HATE?)

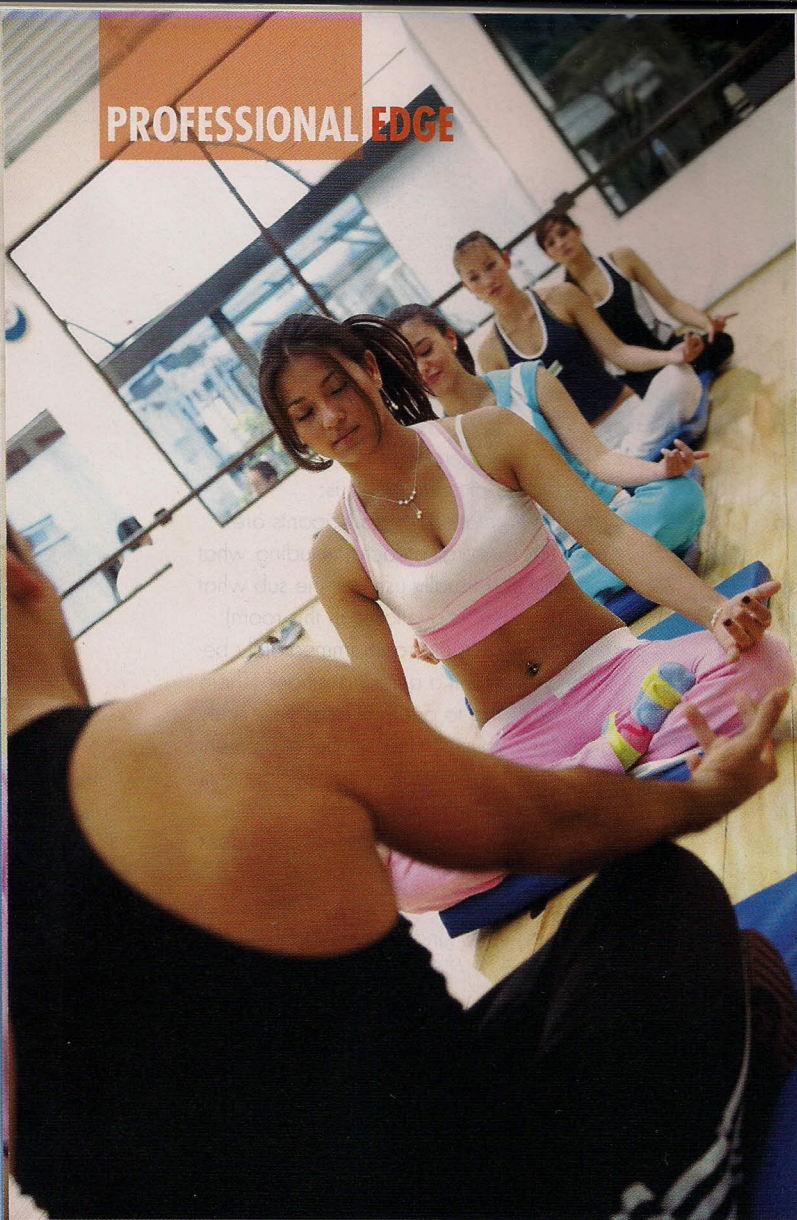
How Do You Sub for Someone Else Successfully?

Now that we have glanced at things effective instructors can do to make sure that their temporary replacement by a substitute teacher results in a positive experience for the guests, let us consider what subs themselves can do in the interest of success.

First, present an enthusiastic, positive approach from the moment of your arrival at the club. When introducing yourself to the front desk staff, instead of walking in nervously with your head down and whispering, "I'm the six o'clock sub," announce yourself with confidence. You may say something like, "Hi! I'm the gal who's gonna rock the six o'clock timeslot tonight for Frank," or "Hi! I'm the sub at 6."

Likewise, when students walk into the room, greet everyone with confidence, even if you feel shaky on the inside at the start. Fake it until you make it. Showing confidence by making eye contact, asking a few people for their names and speaking strongly will help get everyone to give you a chance. Make a vow to remain positive in your response if someone greets you with a less-than-positive attitude, such as asking, "Are you ready for us?" or "Where's Frank and who are you?"

Make an effort to prepare an introduction or story to break the ice. For example, I always try to say something specific about the original instructor, like, "We all send good thoughts out to Frank tonight who's sick in bed, and he hopes to be back next week." This helps put everyone's mind at ease who may be asking, "Where's Frank?" or "Are you now taking over this timeslot permanently?"



Second, I try to inform everyone of the purpose of the class, with a preparation for change. For example, if the class is a strength class, I say, "My job in the next 60 minutes is to make you stronger, just like Frank does, and although I'll get you to the same destination, we may get there by a few different roads today. That's okay, right, because to get what you've never had, you sometimes have to do what you've never done." After your class opening, be sure to have your finger on the "play" button so that the music begins immediately when you finish speaking. Leave no time for silence because this sometimes gives people time to second-guess whether they really want to stay or not.

You can also do other things to guarantee success. Arrive as early as you can to prepare for any challenges. For example, if you arrive for the strength class and realize that the class taking place prior to yours is hot yoga, you will have extra time to go to the front desk and ask for assistance in lowering the temperature as soon as the yoga class finishes. In this way, temperature management is one less thing you have to do in the rush between the current class and yours.

Find out as much as you can about the class from the regular instructor. Ask about his or her general style and equipment used. If possible, try to find out about at least one regular student in the class so you can introduce yourself to that person as an icebreaker. For example, if the regular instructor tells you that there will be a "Judy" in the front row

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who always wears pink leg warmers and works at Wholefoods®, you probably will spot her immediately and you can say, “Are you Judy? I love Wholefoods.”

If that instructor’s style matches yours, try to follow it so that the students feel the least amount of change. If your styles are so very different, embrace the change with a positive attitude. Those students who absolutely will not open their minds enough to take a different styled class will leave early enough so as not to be a disruption for the rest of the experience. When and if you observe people leave, stay positive and focus on those who remain. Although it is easy to get discouraged seeing someone leave, the experience will be positive *only* if you continue to focus on those remaining in the class. Whereas I used to get distracted instantly when a guest left class early, I learned to remind myself: The reason ice cream companies make such a wide variety of flavors is that not every flavor is for every person, and likewise occurs with instructors. NO instructor, no matter how successful, will please everyone always.

Accentuate the Positive

Making the most positive situation out of a substitute teaching assignment needs careful preparation. First, regular instructors have the responsibility to make sure they teach with a style that opens their students’ minds to new methods and possibilities. Second, substitute instructors can prepare themselves positively, in mind and matter, in order to make the most compelling experience for the guests. Ultimately, although people many times resist change, they will leave their comfortable cocoon if they find another one. **AF**

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