



Cross-Train your Training Staff

by Christine Romani-Ruby

As the demand grows for Pilates, fitness facilities are creating programs to meet this demand. One of the most frequent concerns of fitness facilities is staffing these new Pilates programs. They often hire a Pilates instructor and things just don't work out because of the challenges within the fitness environment.

Teaching Pilates in a fitness center often involves sharing space and existing as a profit center that is part of a team that supports the entire operation. I once had a Pilates teacher who told me to stop lifting weights and running because it was destroying my body. This probably would not fly in the fitness environment. I agree that these activities can be hard on my posture, but maybe a better way to put it would be: "Be sure to do your Pilates to counteract the effects of running and lifting weights." This instructor failed to support the mental and physical benefits that these other activities provided and the activities that were offered in the rest of the facility. Simply put, this Pilates instructor did not understand the business of fitness, nor had he explored the benefits of other fitness activities.

The traditional fitness instructor is taught to be a cheerleader, to teach to the general population, and to cross train. He or she takes the people in the back of the room, who are struggling, and moves them to the front so that they can see well. In contrast, the traditional Pilates instructor has been in the dance world where the person in the back of the room, who can't keep up, is asked to leave. This, again, won't fly in the fitness environment.

So, as a fitness director looks for a Pilates instructor, he or she should look further than simply a Pilates certification. Look for experience not only in Pilates, but in fitness. Look for flexibility of thought and a desire to function as a team. The Pilates techniques can be taught, but it is difficult to teach flexibility and

impossible to wait for experience. Some of the most talented and innovative Pilates teachers are experienced fitness instructors. The experience of working with different bodies is an important asset for teaching Pilates and instructors new to the fitness environment lack this talent. A Pilates instructor's success comes from watching movement and making it more normal with the use of cueing and equipment. One must first have a good grasp of what is normal to successfully identify the needs of a client.

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I often recommend that a facility planning a Pilates program bring training in-house, and then select members of present staff as well as outside, hired Pilates instructors to work together for several weekends. This not only teaches the fitness instructors Pilates, but allows them to get to know the Pilates instructors and mentor with them. The two groups can begin to mesh ideas and support one another while designing their own standards. This is the most basic step to a successful Pilates program, more important than certification, more important than Pilates equipment.

A cohesive team is vital to the success of your program. There cannot be camps

of Pilates instructors teaching different methods without supporting one another. The Pilates staff must be familiar with the rest of the facility and must support general fitness in all aspects offered at the center. If the newly hired Pilates instructors have never experienced a Step class, get them in there to at least observe, and if the Step instructor has not tried a Pilates class, assign a class to them. It is even wise to have the front desk staff experience a Pilates class. This will help them to describe the new class to the membership.

Once you have developed and staffed your Pilates program, it is important to work to retain and build this new staff. Continuing education is vital to retention and to building the program. When the staff feels that they are learning and growing in their environment, they are more likely not to shop around. This learning will also stimulate the staff to create new programs which will help to build and retain membership. It is a win-win situation.

Continuing education can and should be offered in many ways. One of the best ways is to bring workshops into your facility. This allows the instructor the convenience of not leaving home. Another innovative way to do this is to offer online education courses to your staff. This offers the convenience of staying home with the added flexibility of doing the course at any time. In addition to these venues, conferences allow a condensed setting with many opportunities for learning as well as a view of new products. Supporting continuing education venues for instructors keeps your staff up-to-date and appreciative of the wonderful, supportive environment in which they work. **CS**

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