

# THE 4 KEY STAGES OF THE GROUP FITNESS INSTRUCTOR JOURNEY



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I've always enjoyed sharing things that I've learned; I'm sort of hardwired for it. At school, I'd often help other students understand their homework and class materials, during recess and lunchtimes in the school library. It felt good to share what I had learned and it gave me purpose.

Fast-forward to my 20s, and as a young aerobics instructor, this trait persisted. I would frequently find myself helping other instructors gain the work experience they needed to complete their certification. I didn't really have a name for what I was doing in those days, but later, as I formalised the working relationship and added structure to it, it became clear that what I was offering was called 'mentoring'.

## The stages of growth and development

As a mentor, workshop and course presenter, and group fitness coordinator, I began to notice behavioural patterns in instructors that corresponded with the amount of experience they had. On reflection, I also recognised it in myself; I call it the 'Stages of Growth and Development'. Some instructors move through the stages with natural progression, whereas others drop out or get stuck in a certain stage.

Interestingly, these stages are not specific to the careers of group exercise instructors, but are similar to the four stages of wisdom in Indian and yogic traditions. 'The stages are that of the student, the householder, the wise elder and renunciant', writes Debra Molfitt, the author of *Awake in the World: 108 Practices to Live a Divinely Inspired Life*.

Similarly, the Swiss psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung suggested there are four archetypes, four stages of life: The Athlete Stage, The Warrior Stage, The Statement Stage and The Stage of the Spirit.

As a group exercise instructor, these stages of growth and development follow the same trajectory. This is how I have classified them:

- Stage 1.** The Wide-Eyed Instructor
- Stage 2.** The Self-Confident Instructor
- Stage 3.** The Knowledge Seeker Instructor
- Stage 4.** The Yoda of Instructors.

Here are my observations:

### STAGE 1. The Wide-Eyed Instructor

You are a new instructor in the industry. This stage has nothing to do with the age at which you start teaching, and everything to do with your enthusiasm for learning and absorbing as much as you can. You know that everyone else has more experience and you are, literally, learning on your feet. You look for role models, ways to improve and need reassurance from your participants that you are on the right track. This stage usually lasts for between one and two years.

### STAGE 2. The Self-Confident Instructor

You've found your rhythm with preparing, delivering and interacting with your participants. You've developed confidence and an appreciation of your power as an instructor. You often

get good feedback and are in high-demand to teach classes. This is also the stage, however, in which a sense of entitlement can arise. You are aware, for example, that you can wield your power to galvanise participants into action if you are unhappy about a management decision. Instructors in this stage can often blur the line of professionalism, and some will never move on from it. This stage can last between two and five years.

### STAGE 3. The Knowledge Seeker Instructor

Transitioning from the previous stage to this one usually requires some discomfort. You may have lost classes due to class attendance or programming changes, had some challenging interactions with participants, or tried to teach a class that you just didn't gel with. This is when you realise you don't know everything and you open your mind to further education. You may pursue a new format or want to learn another skill. You are on a pathway to learn more. This stage usually starts around the five-year mark and can continue for the rest of your career.

### STAGE 4. The Yoda of Instructors

You know that you have reached this stage when the following start to happen:

- Nothing rocks your boat too much. Timetable changes, disgruntled participants and negative feedback are things that you take into account, but they don't play on your mind. You know that this will always happen, and any discomfort will pass. Tomorrow is another day.

- You are sought out for advice and mentorship, and regarded as a go-to person for information. You have seen the good, bad and ugly and have taught so many classes that nothing really surprises you. Usually in this stage, you have taught a timeslot for several years, and intimately know your participants. There is a level of trust by your participants, other instructors, and even management in your knowledge and sage advice.
- You will deepen your knowledge in specific areas and perhaps take on education that requires diligent study, with the purpose of being able to directly apply it in the classes that you currently teach, or as a way to expand what you offer to your participants.

In a recent presentation I shared this information with the participating instructors. While self-identifying the stages that best represented them, some commented that they often bounced between stages. This, however, is not something that can actually happen. You can't go from being a Self-Confident Instructor to The Yoda of Instructors and back again; it's about progression, not regression. Perhaps these are examples of the Self-Confident Instructor believing that they are at a higher level than they really are.

The key thing is understanding that this is a pathway that you will move along as you evolve and mature. It is a gradual process that is not without discomfort, but that's okay, because growing pains are proof that you are, in fact, growing; and this is a great accomplishment. ♦