

HOSPITALITY IN FITNESS – PART II – PERSONAL TRAINING

CODY MCDERMOTT, CSCS

Being a successful personal trainer goes far beyond knowing exercise routines and programming. It is about creating a welcoming environment where clients feel safe, understood, and supported. Every session is an opportunity to build a relationship, and your ability to adapt, listen, and serve your clients directly impacts their progress and your success. At the core of this relationship is hospitality, the understanding that your clients' well-being, both physically and emotionally, is your priority. When you focus on connecting with clients, showing genuine care, and offering exceptional service, you will not only help them reach their goals, but also create lasting impressions that can turn a one-time client into a lifelong advocate.

BE OPEN TO ALL EXPERIENCES

When studying for a personal trainer certification, you might initially imagine working with a typical client, someone looking to get healthier, lose some fat, become more active, and feel good about themselves. However, the reality is far more diverse. As a personal trainer, you will encounter clients from all walks of life, each with unique backgrounds and fitness levels.

While your certification provides a solid framework for guiding clients toward healthier habits, you will often need to adapt that framework to meet a variety of needs. Your clients may be overweight, underweight, injury-free, or recovering from chronic injuries. Some might be as flexible as gymnasts, while others are stiff as a board. They could be pregnant, postpartum, battling cancer, recently cancer-free, dealing with fused spines or knee replacements, or simply new to fitness altogether.

By tailoring your approach to these unique challenges, you not only build trust but also provide an environment where clients feel seen, understood, and cared for. In a superior hospitality organization everyone should be striving to say “yes” to the guest, rather than figuring out ways to say “no,” “sorry, not my department,” “it doesn’t work that way around here,” “sadly, we cannot accommodate that request,” or “if you call back in the morning, perhaps we’ll be able to help you,” (4). When a client realizes that their personal trainer is willing to meet them where they are, physically, emotionally, and mentally, they are far more likely to feel safe and supported in their fitness journey.

These experiences, while challenging, are invaluable. They not only prepare you to work with a broader range of clients in the future but also set you apart as a personal trainer who can confidently handle complexity. Imagine the confidence and hope a client feels when they see progress they once thought impossible, whether it is easing chronic pain, regaining strength, or simply feeling comfortable in their own skin.

If you feel unprepared to work with a particular client, it is okay to say “no.” But if you believe in your abilities and take the

opportunity, it could lead to a lasting relationship, referrals, or both. Remember, your willingness to adapt is more than a skill; it is an act of hospitality that shows clients they matter. In the words of General William McRaven, “Life is a struggle and the potential for failure is ever present, but those who live in fear of failure, or hardship, or embarrassment will never achieve their potential. Without pushing your limits, without occasionally sliding down the rope headfirst, without daring greatly, you will never know what is truly possible in your life,” (2). Remember, it is not just your client that should be challenged in every session, but you as well.

By being open to these diverse experiences, you will grow as a personal trainer and become an indispensable asset to your clients, your employer, or your own business. Future clients will need your expertise, so do not limit yourself. Embrace these challenges to build confidence, expand your skills, and create a warm, welcoming space for everyone who walks through your door.

LISTEN

You know who you are, your family and friends might know, but your clients do not. To them, you are a stranger, and being vulnerable in front of someone new can be incredibly difficult. The world of fitness may be entirely foreign to your client, filled with unfamiliar exercises, jargon, and expectations. For many, the fear of starting over again can be paralyzing.

This is why listening is your most powerful tool. By truly listening, you begin to understand not just who your client is but also what they have experienced. “Listening to learn comes from a heartfelt desire to truly understand other people. The more we understand, the more we can help them; the more we help them, the more loyal they become,” (3). Maybe they have had negative encounters with fitness in the past, felt judged or inadequate, or struggled with self-consciousness. A listening ear can break down these emotional walls, creating an environment of trust and safety.

Listening goes beyond hearing words, it is about observing, empathizing, and adapting. If your client struggles with a particular exercise, do not overwhelm them with technical jargon to prove your expertise. Instead, meet them where they are. Build a workout plan, no matter how basic, that boosts their confidence and eases them into progress. Small adjustments, like lightening a weight or slowing down a treadmill, show that you are attuned to their needs and dedicated to their well-being. In the book, *Leading Loyalty*, the authors use the word “counterfeit” as a way to describe pretending or faking an interaction that leads to disingenuous interactions with clients that can harm you in the long run. “We counterfeit listen when we are thinking about our response rather than trying to really understand; or when we assume we already know what another person is thinking and, therefore, don’t need to give our full attention when we are

nodding and checking our phone screen at the same time or talking and testing simultaneously,” (3).

A client who feels heard is far more likely to open up, trust you, and invest in the process. When clients recognize that you have tailored their fitness experience to their needs, they will feel a sense of care and respect that sets you apart as a personal trainer.

Safety should always be your number one priority, but it does not stand alone. By listening to your intuition and your client’s verbal and non-verbal cues, you can create a balanced approach that challenges them while making them feel comfortable. Your attentiveness can turn a hesitant first-timer into a lifelong client, transforming their initial fears into newfound confidence and motivation.

BE PREPARED BUT UNPREPARED

Every personal trainer starts a session with a plan, a carefully designed workout tailored to their client’s goals. But plans do not always go as expected. A client might show up late, reveal an injury, struggle with energy levels, or underperform due to factors beyond your control. Life is unpredictable, and adaptability is what separates a good personal trainer from a great one.

When challenges arise, it is your role as a professional to adjust without hesitation. Flexibility in your approach can turn what feels like a setback into an opportunity for growth. For example, if a client is tired, pivot to exercises that focus on technique or recovery. If they are dealing with unexpected soreness, shift to a lighter, mobility-focused session. These adjustments let clients see that their personal trainer is not just going through the motions, they are actively invested in their well-being.

Adaptability is not just about salvaging a session, it is about showing your client that setbacks are a natural part of the process. Reassure them that tough days are to be expected and that progress is not always linear. By being the calm, resourceful presence they can rely on, you create an environment where they feel supported, no matter the circumstances.

Your ability to adapt also conveys a sense of hospitality and care. A seasoned personal trainer knows that habits are hard to break, and new habits are hard to create. “For a habit to stay changed, people must believe change is possible. And most often, that belief only emerges with the help of the group,” (1). You are their support system; you are part of their group. A client who knows you will meet them where they are, no matter the situation, feels valued and understood. This fosters trust and encourages long-term commitment.

Remember, you are only a small part of your client’s day, but how you handle sudden changes can have a significant impact. Show them through your actions and words that setbacks are not failures, they are opportunities to recalibrate and keep moving forward. This level of attentiveness and care helps clients feel accomplished even when the session does not go as planned, reinforcing their belief in their journey and their trust in you as their guide.

BE AUTHENTIC TO YOURSELF

Personal training offers a unique opportunity to carve your own path, a privilege that can be both exciting and intimidating. In a profession where authenticity is craved more than ever, the pressure to conform to social media trends or mimic other personal trainers’ style can feel overwhelming. Do not pretend or attempt to “counterfeit” your way to the top. “A counterfeit practice is like counterfeit money. At a quick glance, it might look real; but closer inspection reveals that it is only an imitation. The counterfeit to genuine human connection might be feigned interest, intrusion without empathy, or following a script with disinterest,” (3). True success lies in staying grounded in who you are and allowing your personality to shine through.

Clients are drawn to authenticity because it fosters trust. They do not need someone flashy or performative, they need someone real. Your job is not to dazzle them with theatrics, but to guide them toward their goals in a way that feels genuine and approachable. The more you allow your true self to come through, the stronger the bond you will form with your clients. This bond is what keeps them coming back, even when the fitness journey gets tough.

It is easy to feel pressure to fit into the mold of a larger-than-life extrovert or an Instagram-perfect personal trainer. But remember, your clients are not looking for perfection, they are looking for someone who understands their challenges and genuinely cares about their success. If you are naturally more reserved, lean into that; your quiet confidence can provide a sense of calm. If you are outgoing, channel that energy to inspire and uplift. Whatever your personality, embrace it fully and let it guide your interactions.

Being authentic also means acknowledging the reason you became a personal trainer in the first place: your desire to help others improve their lives. Let that purpose drive you every day. “Just as true loyalty comes from feelings deep inside you, the power to inspire loyalty comes from deep inside as well. It’s fundamentally a question of the kind of person you choose to be,” (3). What is the personal trainer that you desire to be: the one that phones it every day or the one that dares to, at the very least, attempt to authentically better a client’s life? When your actions stem from a place of genuine care and passion, it will resonate with your clients in ways that no scripted performance ever could.

Authenticity is not just a trait, it is a competitive advantage. While trends may come and go, your genuine connection with your clients will stand the test of time. It is not about impressing the masses, it is about making a meaningful impact on the lives of those who have chosen to trust you.

DO MORE THAN YOU HAVE TO

In personal training, clients may come and go for reasons beyond your control, relocation, financial changes, or shifts in motivation. This reality can make it tempting to limit your effort, especially for clients you may not see long-term. However, the value of going the extra mile cannot be overstated. The impact you have on a client, whether in a single session or over years, is far-reaching.

Every small act of care, such as offering encouragement during a tough set, creating at-home workouts, or writing a handwritten birthday card, matters. These gestures demonstrate your genuine investment in their success and well-being. For clients, these moments of thoughtfulness can turn an average training session into an inspiring and memorable experience. A client who feels valued and supported is more likely to stay engaged, speak highly of you, and refer others to your services.

Exceeding expectations is not just about client retention, it is about your growth as a personal trainer. Each time you go above and beyond, you sharpen your skills, deepen your connections, and reinforce your dedication to your craft. “We listen to them with our eyes and ears. Does it take time to show empathy? Yes, and no. It certainly requires effort, but it begins with a mindset (or, perhaps better said, a ‘heartset’). And often we’ll pay a heavier price in time, effort, and money for not showing empathy,” (3). In your profession, you want to play the long game when developing these habits so that one day, they will become second nature, and will shape you into a professional known for exceptional care and service.

Remember, the effort you put in today creates ripples that extend beyond the gym. A client may move on, but they will carry the positive experience you provided. Those memories might bring them back one day or inspire them to recommend you to someone else. Approach every session as an opportunity to make a difference, no matter how long your time with a client may last.

The best personal trainers do not just meet expectations, they exceed them over and over again. By showing genuine care and enthusiasm, you will not only elevate your clients’ journey, but also solidify your place as a standout in the industry.

UNDERSTAND BODY LANGUAGE

As personal trainers, we often take our own body awareness for granted. Years of training have made proper technique and control second nature to us, so when things get tough, we can adjust without thinking. For many clients, though, that same sense of awareness has yet to develop. Their bodies are unfamiliar to them in these challenging moments, and they rely on you to guide them.

Understanding body language is not just about observing form, it is about tuning into the subtle cues that show how a client is feeling, physically and emotionally. Are they pushing through the set with visible strain? Are they hesitant or unsure of their movement? Their body can tell you when they are at their limit or when they need encouragement. This is where your hospitality comes into play: by recognizing these signs, you create a safe and supportive environment for your client.

When you observe a client’s body language, you can adjust the workout to meet their needs, whether that means reducing the weight, changing the pace, or offering more guidance. It shows that you are attentive, empathetic, and truly invested in their well-being. As you build trust with your client, this attention to their body language will also help foster a deeper, more personal connection.

The more you understand your client’s responses, the better you can tailor each session to their specific needs. In doing so, you provide not just a workout, but an experience of genuine care and support. That is what separates good personal trainers from great ones: the ability to listen with more than just your ears.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Even with careful preparation, there will be moments when things do not go as planned. Whether a client experiences an injury, dizziness, or any other unexpected situation, you must remain present and ready to take control of the situation. It is vital to be aware of your surroundings, stay calm, and step in to handle whatever arises with confidence.

In these moments, hospitality is about offering reassurance and providing a sense of safety. A calm and steady demeanor can help ease your client’s anxiety and make them feel like they are in good hands. Let them know that setbacks and unexpected challenges are part of the process, and it is okay to pause or adjust as needed. “We will all find ourselves neck deep in mud someday. That is the time to sing loudly, to smile broadly, to lift up those around you and give them hope that tomorrow will be a better day,” (2). Be that voice that lets your client know, that this moment is not forever. Your response in these moments can be the difference between a client feeling vulnerable and anxious, or supported and empowered.

Never become complacent. Always stay alert, be adaptable, and let your clients know they can trust you to guide them through whatever comes their way, whether it is a physical setback, emotional stress, or just a rough day. This is how you build trust and long-term relationships, showing your clients that they are valued and that you are always there for them, no matter what.

CONCLUSION

In the end, being a personal trainer is more than just coaching techniques or physical progress. It is about building genuine relationships, demonstrating care, and offering hospitality. Every session is a chance to listen, adapt, and appreciate the person in front of you. Appreciating the time your clients invest in you is one of the most significant ways you can honor that relationship. Their time is precious, and when you show that you value it and that they are the center of your world for that training session, it speaks volumes about the trust and care you bring to every training session. “Guests are already at the center of their own world, their own reality. All that matters to them are themselves and the people they care about, a category that probably only tangentially includes you. What they want from you as a service provider is not for you to grab center stage, but to reassure them that they hold center stage in your world as well as in their own,” (4). By embracing this mindset, you will not only elevate your own effectiveness, but also foster long-lasting, positive connections with your clients. Hospitality does not stop at the gym door, it is woven into every interaction you have, every choice you make, and every moment you spend with those who entrust you with their goals.

REFERENCES

1. Duhigg, C. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks; 92, 2012.
2. McRaven, W. *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life...And Maybe the World*. New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing; 63-94, 2017.
3. Rogers, S, Leena, R, and Shawn, M. *Leading Loyalty: Cracking the Code to Customer Devotion*. New York, NY: Franklin Covey Co.; 15-65, 2019.
4. Solomon, M. *The Heart of Hospitality: Great Hotel and Restaurant Leaders Share Their Secrets*. New York, NY: SelectBooks, Inc.; 12-71, 2018.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cody McDermott is the Head Group Fitness Instructor, Head Personal Trainer, Manager, and Part-Owner of Shed Group Fitness Belle Meade in Nashville, TN. Shed Group Fitness Belle Meade is a boutique studio that specializes in high-intensity interval training (HIIT) and personalized workouts for one-on-one clients. Since McDermott started there in November of 2014, it has grown to five locations in the Nashville area and has contributed to the local fitness community.

WHY PERFORM GREAT WHEN YOU CAN PERFORM BETTER?

Join the experts at our 3-Day Functional Training Summits.

Whether you train clients, rehab patients, or work with athletes, this is your chance to network, delve into industry topics, earn CEUs, and discover innovative methods from leading industry professionals.



Scan for more information

Chicago, IL: **June 12-14, 2025**

Long Beach, CA: **July 17-19, 2025**

Providence, RI: **August 14-16, 2025**

**PERFORM
BETTER!**

SUMMIT

