



**LES MILLS**

# The impact of Instructor quality in the physical activity sector

Discussing the value of Instructors and how we can improve quality through recruitment, development, retention, and reward

With a foreword by Wendy Coulson,  
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By Les Mills, supported by ukactive

# contents.

**Foreword:**

Wendy Coulson, CEO, Les Mills UK & Ireland ..... (p4)

**Introduction:** ..... (p5)

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**Part One:**

What makes a “quality” Instructor - and how can we teach and nurture skills?..... (p7)

**Part Two:**

How does the quality of Instructors impact member experience?.... (p11)

**Part Three:**

The true value of Instructors to clubs, members, and the industry: pay, rewards, and retention ..... (p12)

**Part Four:**

The great pay debate (and how we can improve Instructor rewards)..... (p15)

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**Summary:**..... (p17)

**Case study:**

Village Gym boosts class occupancy by 40% through Instructor training..... (p20)

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**References & resources:**..... (p22)

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# foreword.



**Wendy Coulson,**  
CEO, Les Mills UK & Ireland

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When you ask people why they go to a certain restaurant, their answer will usually involve a range of factors. It might be the food, the atmosphere, the waiter who remembers their name or the great selection of wines. The answer is rarely down to one single thing. It almost always relates to the overall experience.

The same can be said for group exercise. There's more to a class than simply the moves and the content. The factors that make group exercise memorable are largely due to the overall experience created by a "rock star" Instructor. While we know that safety, great technique and achieving desired results is critical for a great workout, there's another element that forms the unbreakable bond with group exercise. It's the way "rock star" Instructors make people feel – the soft skills – that help drive up retention rates in clubs across the world.

So why are group exercise Instructors so rarely rewarded and developed? Given their immense impact on the success of a club, why is it that financial recognition for this role has barely increased in 20 years? How can we better equip new Instructors with the skills they need to succeed in a very competitive market?

These are some of the questions that Les Mills and a group of industry experts set out to answer at a roundtable discussion that took place in November 2018.

The aim of the roundtable was to examine the impact of Instructors on customer experience and operators, and to discuss how the industry can improve recruitment, retention, training and rewards to encourage an overall higher standard of Instructor. Recent research indicates that 35% of Instructors are currently looking for a new job, and of that number, 40% are thinking about leaving the sector altogether. Given that members are often more loyal to their favourite Instructor than they are to a facility, this is a significant issue we cannot ignore.

If we all work together to improve the quality and value of group exercise Instructors, we can have a significant impact on the industry. It's clear that when done well, it will benefit your customers, your brand and your bottom line.

# introduction.

On 29th November 2018, Les Mills hosted a group of industry experts at a roundtable discussion looking at the impact of instructor quality across the physical activity sector. Participants included representatives from academia, training providers, boutique and mainstream operators, National Governing Bodies of Sport and publicly funded bodies, membership bodies, and included instructors and instructor trainers.

The aim of the roundtable was to examine the impact of Instructors on customer experience and operators, and to discuss how the industry can improve recruitment, retention, training, and rewards to encourage an overall higher standard of Instructor.

The first half of the roundtable debated the skills and character traits that make quality Instructors, and discussed how these skills can be taught and nurtured through training, academic qualifications, in-house development, and other channels. The roundtable then discussed the value of instructors to clubs and operators, members, and the industry. The second half of the roundtable looked more closely at retention and reward of Instructors, including pay and recognition.

This white paper, produced by Les Mills and supported by ukactive, documents the roundtable discussion, summarises the agenda, and reports on the conclusions. We hope you enjoy reading the range of expert opinions shared.

**part one.**

**What makes a  
“quality”  
Instructor - and  
how can we teach  
and nurture  
skills?**

# What makes a “quality” Instructor - and how can we teach and nurture skills?

Anyone who has ever participated in a group exercise class will know how integral the Instructor is to the atmosphere and enjoyment. No two Instructors are the same, but some are undeniably better than others. What do we mean by “better”? This was the starting point of our roundtable discussion.

There is so much more to a group exercise experience than the basics of safety and content. The factors that make group exercise memorable are largely due to the input of the Instructor. A group exercise Instructor can encourage cohesion across the class, develop a connection to and between the individuals, remove fears and inhibitions, and make each member feel a valued part of a group experience. This ability to create engagement is a valuable skill. As a group, we explored how it can be identified, taught, and developed.

Quality Instructors need much more than the core skills which can be assessed in an educational or vocational setting. They also need great communication skills, intuition, empathy, and the ability to read body language (and adapt their own). Emotional intelligence is a key aspect of being a great Instructor. Is there a gap in the recruitment and education sections of the Instructor journey? We asked who is responsible for teaching and nurturing these skills in new Instructors (who may not be aware of the importance of soft skills until they start teaching).

We heard from the boutique sector, which gave valuable insight into the importance of personality and soft skills in boutique Instructors. Rather than

“**The factors that make group exercise memorable are largely due to the input of the Instructor.**”

focusing on qualifications or a fitness background, boutique operators tend to seek out compelling characters who display an ability to motivate and

inspire members. Such people are already able to communicate and engage with people. These inbuilt skills are seen as more difficult to teach. In-house training offered by many boutique operators provides further teaching and group exercise skills, enabling these “rock star” Instructors to become great at what they do. By approaching Instructor recruitment in this way, is the boutique sector helping other operators to raise the standards?

“**27% of those surveyed said “a friendly personality” was what they wanted from a trainer or Instructor**”

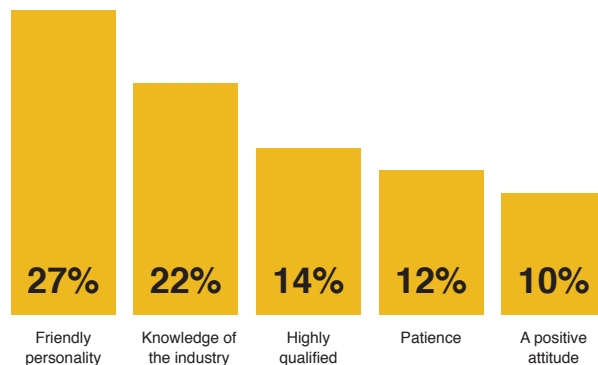
Instructors at the roundtable asked if it is realistic to think Instructors have adequate time to give in-depth interaction with class participants. Operators - especially those who pay freelance Instructors - should consider the time pressures put on Instructors who may have back to back classes. If operators expect Instructors to deliver a consistent, on-brand experience, they may need to give Instructors more support and more time to interact with members.

Instructors need to feel valued, and the industry cannot reasonably expect committed Instructors to maintain a positive, passionate outlook if they are not supported and rewarded throughout their career. The roundtable debated to what extent the industry is successful in doing this. Discussion focused on the experience of freelance Instructors. Are they made to feel part of the brand: are they included in team meetings, in the mix for monthly staff member awards, and invited to facility events and parties? If they are not, how can operators expect them to deliver an authentic on-brand experience? The roundtable group agreed much needs to change within the industry for freelance Instructors, starting perhaps with operators asking for their feedback about the club, studio, timetable and member experience.



2018 research conducted by fitness tech provider MINDBODY highlighted the key qualities fitness consumers look for in Instructors. [1] The data tells us that soft skills are highly important to consumers, even more so than knowledge or qualifications. 27% of those surveyed said “a friendly personality” was what they wanted from a trainer or Instructor, 22% said “knowledge of the industry”, and 14% said “highly qualified”. This research suggests that knowledgeable Instructors with strong people skills can help drive repeat visits and retention rates in clubs.

Most valued Instructor qualities



Source: MINDBODY 2018

### Entry-level quality: how can we close the skills gap between students, graduates, and Instructors?

The roundtable participants included academics and learning and development providers, both of whom deliver training and qualifications to entry-level PTs and Instructors. The group discussed what academic institutions and vocational training providers look for in students entering the industry. What are the soft skills and qualities which suggest a student will become a great Instructor?

Discussion fell to the skills gap that can occur when a new graduate enters the workplace. There is clearly a significant difference in the experience of learning as a student, and of being employed (or self-employed) as an Instructor. Is anybody taking responsibility for flagging up these differences during their training? If our new Instructors only discover the reality once they start work, what support and ongoing training is on offer?

Skills gaps may exist in the areas of business, finance, sales and marketing, and people skills. The group suggests these could be addressed in three ways: by learning providers (as part of existing qualifications), by providing mentorships, or by encouraging new Instructors to seek out supplementary training.

### Best practice in recruitment and retention

As an industry, we have a shared responsibility to understand the value of Instructors, to retain and reward them properly, and to build Instructor quality and longevity.

Looking to operators and facilities, the group discussed examples of best practice with Instructor recruitment, reward, and retention. We need to listen to the voices of big operators, boutiques, and smaller gyms outside of large conurbations.

“As an industry, we have a shared responsibility to understand the value of Instructors, to retain and reward them properly, and to build Instructor quality and longevity.”



The success of the boutique sector highlights several best-practice points. The boutique model puts the Instructor at the centre of the brand vision. Boutiques focus on attracting and recruiting people who can become great Instructors. They then spend time, energy, and money on developing their people in-house. Boutique operators recognise that their Instructors deliver more than training sessions. They communicate brand messaging, a sense of community, and loyalty. Boutiques make a huge effort to put Instructors front and centre of their business. We must consider how Instructors feel when they are supported, developed, and rewarded this way. It has a clear effect on the customer journey. When operators retain, recruit, and utilise Instructors well, this has a positive impact on membership.

How does the boutique model differ to other operators' approach to Instructors - and what can we all learn from the boutique approach?

We heard from our academic representative who gave an insightful example from the university

setting, where part-time lecturers are now paid to come to team meetings and take part in the appraisal process. This has greatly increased work quality and quantity, and boosted the general culture of the University, with part-time staff feeling more valued and included in the everyday operations.

Whilst pay is paramount - the roundtable discussed a variety of valuable methods of recognising and rewarding Instructors, including CPD points, investment in learning, titles and awards, or simply being observed and listened to more often. For example, The Association for Talent Development (ATD) found that companies that offer comprehensive training programs have 218% higher income per employee than companies without formalised training. **These companies also enjoy a 24% higher profit margin than those who spend less on training [2]**

The general feedback from Instructors is that they want to feel their input matters. How can the industry do better?



**part two.**

**How does the  
quality of  
Instructors impact  
member  
experience?**

# What makes a “quality” Instructor - and how can we teach and nurture skills?

Members are often more loyal to their favourite Instructor than they are to the facility, equipment, or class timetable. Great Instructors can boost member retention, but if the Instructor does not feel incentivised to stay at a facility, they may unintentionally take members with them when they move on.

The relationship between group exercise Instructors and class participants is incredibly valuable to operators. The roundtable agreed most operators can do more to leverage the knowledge Instructors gather about the member experience. If there is a disparity between the value members bestow on Instructors, and the value operators place on member feedback, this is an obvious place to start. Good Instructors build a loyal following and will often be followed to other clubs by long-term class participants. The key

take out is if you have great Instructors, know that you have them and reward them sufficiently to keep them.

The X-factor of soft skills can have a significant impact on a member’s enjoyment of the class, and the results they get from their workouts. Classes can be notably more challenging, fun, and engaging if the Instructor has those elusive character traits which encourage members to push harder in class.

Instructors are the front line of any operator or studio. They possess the most up-to-date and frank information about member experience. Can we be better at listening to our Instructors - acknowledging that the freelancers may be completely left out of regular team meetings or debrief sessions?



**part three.**

**The true value of  
Instructors to  
clubs, members,  
and the industry:  
pay, rewards, and  
retention**

# The true value of Instructors to clubs, members, and the industry: pay, rewards, and retention

The discussion moved to the true value of Instructors to their employer. Are operators measuring the true value of Instructors to their bottom line? This may be difficult to calculate, but is impossible to deny. For example, the EMD UK national participation survey 2018 found that the Instructor was a greater influence on the choice of class than the results or the price [3]. And the MINDBODY survey 2018 suggested that 20% of people say Instructors are the most important factor when it comes to sticking to a routine [1].

Operators should assess the true value of each Instructor to their business. Is it possible to assess the revenue per head of each member, and attribute some of this to their group exercise Instructor or instructors? Once operators have this knowledge, they can focus on retaining the best and most popular Instructors.

Instructors need to feel valued. Intrinsic motivation and financial remuneration are both important aspects of rewarding and retaining good people. How can operators be encouraged to focus on both intrinsic motivation, as well as extrinsic, external factors like pay? **The soft elements of reward and recognition are powerful motivators, but - just as the boutique model has shown us - this cannot be at the detriment of reasonable pay compensation. Both must be present, or operators risk losing great instructors in a very competitive marketplace.**

Small changes can be made to the way management teams interact with group exercise Instructors. Suggestions from the roundtable group included attending classes, or at least looking in on them to see how they are being delivered and received (and to get an up-to-date view of the type of member who is attending, what support the Instructor needs, what training is available to them etc.).

Global survey research highlights that members want results from their investment in group exercise. This feedback is increased in younger demographics: 52% millennials and 50% generation Z gym members engage in fitness classes, preferring to workout with others to access the social benefits of exercise [4]. Great Instructors must therefore be truly engaged and passionate. How can clubs encourage this level of quality instruction? Levels of pay are valuable, but not the end of the story. More needs to be done to recognise, reward, and nurture Instructors (especially freelancers).

The group noted this is a two-sided relationship. Instructors need to demonstrate their value (not just expect recognition), and the industry needs to campaign on their behalf.



**part four.**

**The great pay  
debate (and how  
we can improve  
Instructor  
rewards)**

# The great pay debate (and how we can improve Instructor rewards)

There are numerous ways to reward and encourage great Instructors. But pay will always be a significant motivator and demotivator. The roundtable discussed at length the topic of Instructor remuneration, asking why financial recognition has barely increased in 20 years.

## Instructor pay: the facts and figures

According to the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA), the average salary for group exercise instructors in 2017 was £12,647 (with only 9% of the workforce employed as full time instructors, and 91% employed part time). The average salary for male group ex Instructors was £18,667, whilst the average salary for female counterparts was £11,357. [5]

CIMSPA's most recent Labour Market Intelligence report gives additional insights into how Instructors feel about pay and rewards. "Financial reward" was stated as the top dislike for both male (24%) and female (32%) group exercise Instructors.

65% of the workforce report being happy with their current role in general (although this statistic is not solely referring to rates of pay). The other 35% are looking for new jobs, and of this number, 40% are considering leaving the sector entirely.

What can the industry do to tackle issues around pay and financial reward, to help attract and retain the best Instructors (and lessen the risk of losing them to other sectors)?

Funding is still heavily focused on the 16+ market, resulting in a lot of young people entering the industry with level 2 or level 3 qualifications. Next, we may need to develop accepted levels of competency, with pay grades to match.

Some operators and training providers choose to offer CPD, and this has an obvious effect on Instructor quality. How can the industry as a whole match up to those who currently go the extra mile with CPD?

There was widespread agreement the industry could benefit from a clearer structure and hierarchy, with a clear CPD journey for Instructors.

“Financial reward” was stated as the top dislike for both male (24%) and female (32%) group exercise Instructors.

We heard from large operators and boutiques, and debated what can be learned from each operator's experience of paying Instructors. Larger club chains perhaps need to be better aware of the value each Instructor brings to the member experience. Boutique operators - being smaller and more agile – are often better able to assess and respond to the input of Instructors. Chains should not think they need to suddenly start matching the payment model of boutiques, but even a small increase in financial remuneration could make a big difference to the loyalty and satisfaction of instructors.

The boutique model has raised the level of recruitment, reward, and retention. The industry has traditionally been reactive to member demand. Perhaps it is time to filter commercial success back into the member experience. This starts by recognising what great Instructors bring to the member journey, and rewarding them financially.

**summary.**



# Summary: Creating a brighter future for Instructors

To conclude the roundtable, each participant was asked to give their quick-fire thoughts on how the industry can develop a better future for Instructors.

The future of fitness will be increasingly digital, so it should be easier to collate member feedback about Instructor quality. Focus needs to be on recognising the positives, not just fixing the problems, and rewarding great feedback.

Boutique operators are a great example of how to ask for, collate, and respond to member feedback quickly.

New platforms enable operators to gather positive and negative reviews immediately after a class, but it is important to give as much (if not more) time to rewarding enthusiastic feedback. Dwelling on the negative is not motivating for quality Instructors, and does little to breed an inspired and motivated culture of instructors. All Instructors (including freelance) should be considered for rewards and recognition. Remember, class participants don't know (or care) whether their Instructor is in-house or freelance. They are loyal to them regardless.

Operators must understand the importance of valuing and rewarding all Instructors. If the industry gets this right, Instructor quality will automatically rise. The group accepted this is easier to do in smaller clubs and across boutique operators. Big box chains are capable of improving the way they reward and recognise Instructors (although it is likely to take more focus and more time).

The roundtable group discussed ways to improve skills gaps at the level of basic education and qualifications. Is there a case for increasing the amount of apprenticeships taken up by new Instructors? This may contribute to embedding good people into the culture of operators, blending training and employment with the goal of turning out more engaged and higher quality Instructors.

Operators could do more to gather feedback from Instructors, not just members. Instructors are at the front line of the classes on the timetable. How can operators show they appreciate the daily experiences of their Instructors, take their feedback on board, and act on it to improve the customer experience? All operators should know what is happening in their group exercise classes.



# Key Takeaways From The Roundtable

1

## ***Instructors play a major role in clubs***

From impacting member retention to having front line interface as to the key issues facing a club - our sector should not undervalue the role of the Instructor. With research highlighting that members' choice of class is more greatly impacted by the instructor than the results or the price – they play a significant role in clubs. This still has room to be better understood, more greatly leveraged and better rewarded.

2

## ***The development of soft skills should not be underplayed***

As an industry, we should work together to close the skills gaps at qualification level. This should include soft skills, which are key to nurturing truly great Instructors who become integral to customer retention. This can be supported through initial qualifications or methods such as quality in house training, continued professional development offered by training providers in addition to utilising mentorships.

3

## ***Clubs should focus on retaining high quality Instructors***

Pay is the most significant motivator and demotivator for the majority of Instructors – so understanding that even a small increase in remuneration can have a big impact in a competitive landscape is important. The more operators investigate how commercial success is linked to the member journey, the easier it is to recognise the value of the instructor here.

In addition to pay there are other interventions that should be considered in making Instructors feel more valued. For example, management staff should gather member feedback about Instructors (full time and freelance), and focus on rewarding positive feedback. Ensuring that Instructors have their voices heard on issues like timetabling, kit, club layout, and other details they observe from members may also contribute to a happier culture, where Instructors feel valued and recognised.

Instructors are part of your brand. Let's work together to nurture a stronger culture and a better sense of belonging - for both in-house and freelance Instructors across the industry. It will benefit your customers, your brand, and your bottom line.

**case study.**

**Village Gym  
boosts class  
occupancy by  
40% through  
Instructor  
training**

# Case Study: Village Gym boosts class occupancy by 40% through instructor training



With a bold vision to employ only the finest group fitness Instructors and adopt a laser focus on training, Village Gym

transformed its studio offering in a matter of months, adding swathes of new members and a slew of top instructors queueing up to teach in its studios. Here's how they did it.

How can a health club stand out from its rivals when you all have the same high-quality product?

It's a common conundrum for club operators, and one that was frequently being debated by the leadership team of the 29-site Village Gym chain in September 2017.

They were investing heavily in best-in-class products – the UK mid-market operator was well-known for its focus on quality gym equipment and group exercise classes – but there was nothing stopping its rivals from doing the same, and indeed they were.

For the team, there was no point turning to an inferior product 'just to be different', while competing on price risked triggering an ugly race to the bottom. So how could they gain the edge?

In the mind of Village Gym Leisure Director Chris Southall, the answer was startlingly simple. He decided to bet big on improving the quality of the one asset his rivals couldn't possibly copy: his people.



"We've always been well-known for our group exercise offering, having made significant investment in bringing world-class Les Mills programs to our clubs, but we were struggling to stand out in a crowded marketplace," says Southall.

"We always knew the benefits a great group ex offering would bring our clubs in terms of member acquisition and retention, but ultimately the classes are only as good as the people delivering them, so we wanted to ensure there was top-tier quality across our entire Instructor team to ensure we deliver great classes every time and in every club.

"We set ourselves a goal that every Village Gym would have best instructors in town – the real rockstars that pack out every class and bring members by the dozen."

Southall knew the bold ambition would likely result in some casualties among his existing Instructors. But he was also convinced that many already had the talent to achieve greatness with the right level of coaching.

Working closely with his National Fitness Manager Tracy Sollitt, the pair devised an unprecedented plan to put all Village Gym group fitness Instructors through Les Mills Advanced Instructor Module (AIM) training.

Comprising two separate modules (AIM 1 and AIM 2), AIM training is designed to elevate an Instructor from good to great by focusing on the science of performance, connection and striking the right balance of energy, emotion and encouragement to engage all types of class participants.

"Even the best sports players in the world need coaches," says Sollitt. "And it was the same with our Instructors – they were very capable individuals, but we wanted world-beaters. So we drew a line and said from now on we're only going to employ AIM-qualified instructors."

"As you can imagine, there were some pockets of resistance to this – particularly among Instructors who had become stuck in their ways – but it was a case of saying 'You either get on the bus with us,

or we'll drive off without you.”

The key goals for Village were to raise the overall quality of its Instructor team and achieve a resultant uplift in member attendances, class occupancy and Net Promoter Score (NPS).

Yet despite the clear the rationale, the plan to upskill 90 Instructors (a mix of in-house and freelance) represented a step into the unknown, while the promise to pay the £250 for each Instructors' training and their time was a major financial commitment.

But for Village, the results were as swift as they were staggering. Within three months, average class occupancy had leapt by up to 40 per cent in some clubs, while the rate at its pilot site in Bournemouth went from 78% to 96%. Member retention (up by an average of 5-10% per month) and referrals were through the roof, meaning the better-qualified Instructors could now receive higher rates of pay. This in turn led to better Instructor engagement and a long list of talented trainers eager to join the Village team. “Word has got around that we made some bold moves, and for Village it has definitely been a game changer,” adds Southall.

“We were already known for group fitness, but this put us above everyone else in my opinion and I'm delighted to see the impact it's had on our business.”

For the Instructors themselves, the training had a transformational impact on their approach to teaching group fitness.

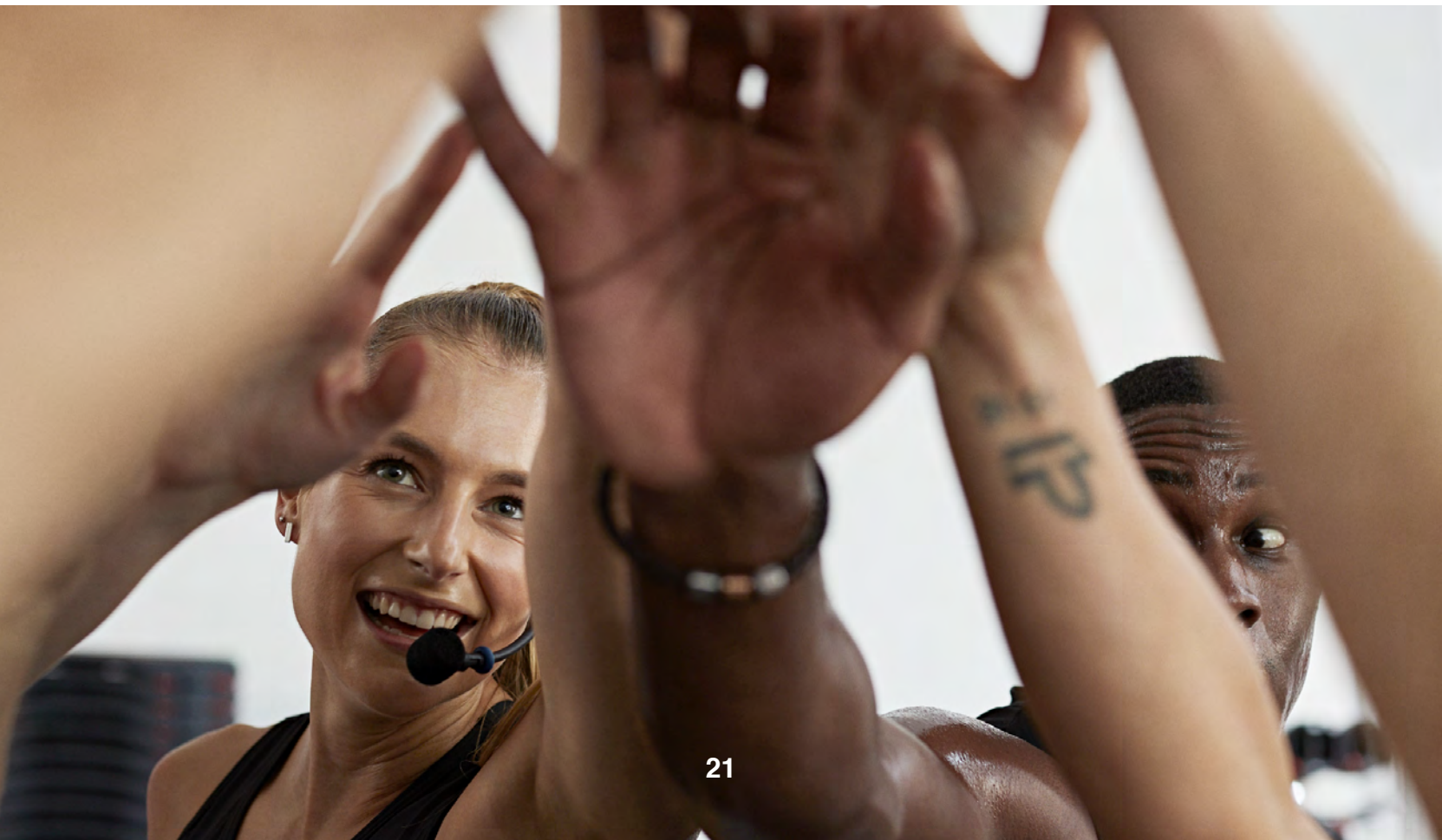
It was immediately obvious to Sollitt which Instructors had been through AIM training and which hadn't.

“The connection between the Instructor and their class is such a standout feature – sometimes you'll see Instructors take a class and just go through the motions, but AIM makes the penny drop and they instantly 'get' the importance of that connection,” she says.

“Instructors go away understanding their strengths, become more self-aware of what they need to improve, and this breeds a confidence and willingness to grow which ultimately results in a consistently heightened experience for club members.”

All Village group exercise instructors have now taken their AIM 1 module, but the operator isn't stopping there, with plans to have everyone through AIM 2 training by end of 2018.

“The thing about quality is that it's very much a journey rather than a destination,” adds Southall. “The path is never-ending, but so are the rewards for getting it right.”



# references & resources.

The following resources are mentioned in this white paper.

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