

TRAINER CREDIBILITY: A SURE WAY TO LOSE IT

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Writing in the May, 1980 issue of the *Training and Development Journal*, Drs. Robert Blake and Jane Mouton highlighted 11 areas of concern which they felt represented real issues that training and development professionals should address. Item number two of their 11 areas of concern was "responding to felt rather than real needs." Therein lies a title which covers a multitude of sins, symptoms and opportunities.

There are a number of reasons why trainers continually respond to organizational red herrings. It is reasonably safe to say, that the majority of requests from line managers to training departments for training interventions, are confusing, misleading and generally invalid. As a matter of fact, in an overwhelming majority of cases (80 percent according to Dr. Tom Gilbert) the issues are not resolvable by conventional training development methodologies.

Recently, we were requested by a Fortune 500 manufacturing com-

pany to assist in the development of a training program for process operators. These operators worked in a paper manufacturing facility and were involved in the control of hardwood and softwood pulps that went into the manufacturing of a paper product. The line managers wanted the development of a training program which would teach these operators the use of specialized decision-making tools (to be devised by us) and to be utilized by those operators in determining under what circumstances relative quantities of hardwood and softwood pulp would be used in the process. Manufacturing economics dictated that a minimum of softwood pulp be used, since softwood pulp is more expensive than hardwood pulp. This was where the trouble began. If the operators complied with the company's demands and used less softwood pulp, thereby rendering a more economical product, they had problems with production. The paper would tear, crinkle, and suffer various other defects. The operators were paid based upon production numbers and paper

quality. It was quite clear that if the company was going to continue to reward the operators based on high production, they could not, without changing the system of rewards, or balance of consequences, expect the operators to reduce substantially the quantity of softwood pulp in the products. The operators were in effect being put in a double bind. Reduce the amount of softwood pulp and suffer quality and production problems, or, increase the amount of softwood mixture in the product and continue to be rewarded for high production numbers. Clearly, no training program could have responded to this problem.

Our firm, as consultants, were in the fortunate position of being able to inform management of that fact and to decline the project if management would not address the real performance issues at hand. Most corporate trainers (and indeed many consultants) would find it difficult, if not impossible to respond in that fashion. It is one thing to say that trainers are guilty of responding to felt rather than real issues and another to

suggest realistic and practical methodologies for dealing with these problems. Given the economic and political environment, the most obvious scenario for the trainer placed in the previous situation would result in a detailed training program for all operators in both the quantity and quality of product being manufactured, and company procedures and practices in controlling the flow of hardwood vs. softwood pulp. The program would in all probability have failed miserably and the training department and trainer in question would have been tagged for the failure.

Trainer as "Whipping Boy"

Without the mandate to question training results from line managers, trainers must constantly be pursuing the elusive goal of performance. Without a responsibility for performance, it is impossible to leverage any positive influence with line management. Whether we realize it or not, performance, not training efficiency, is how our worth to the organization is measured. The solution to the problem of inappropriate training is relatively easy to identify. Effecting the solution in most organizations has been, until recently, virtually impossible. The solution lies in the organizational structure. Training function should report not to the plant superintendent, or to the production manager, or to the personnel manager, but to the executive vice president, or vice president of operations. This reorienting of organizational structure prevents the classic situation wherein the trainer acts as "whipping boy" and "go fetch 'em" for line management. With a responsibility for performance, the trainer can then exert some control over the path of his/her arrows.

As long as trainers report directly to line managers, the training function will constantly be reactive. Reactive to the whims and perceived needs of line management. It is not that training cannot be a positive influence within this structure. It is simply that in most cases, the training department is treating symptoms, not the cause. Lack of effective plant maintenance procedures and manufactur-

ing operations may result in a call by plant management to develop troubleshooting training for maintenance personnel. When the required response is not a training solution at all, but the development of efficient and realistic planned maintenance procedures. In a sales organization, a request for motivational programs may be the symptom of poorly designed territory management practices, or lack of detailed product knowledge, or competition's product knowledge information.

Unless the training department exists as a profit center with full authority to monitor and improve performance, it will never be able to avoid chasing red herrings. The first step in preventing the training function from treating symptoms rather than causes, is to reorganize the lines of authority. The training function should have a central corporate staff and should be adequately staffed in remote plant or regional offices. The responsibilities for manufacturing training, management develop-

ment, sales and marketing, and all other activities should be covered under the one title of performance improvement. Within the training function can be those various disciplines, i.e. sales training management development, technical and skills training. The details may differ. However, without removing the training function from its traditional personnel department control we can expect little positive improvement in the situation.

A final example of the difficulties created by poor organizational structure of the training department of the training function may serve to finally illustrate the point in question. A senior trainer for a major utility was requested to develop a training program for customer-service representatives. The problem indicated was a lack of skill in handling customer complaints. The trainer developed a customized program using the principles of transactional analysis. It was a two-week training process scheduled and implemented for all existing customer-service person-

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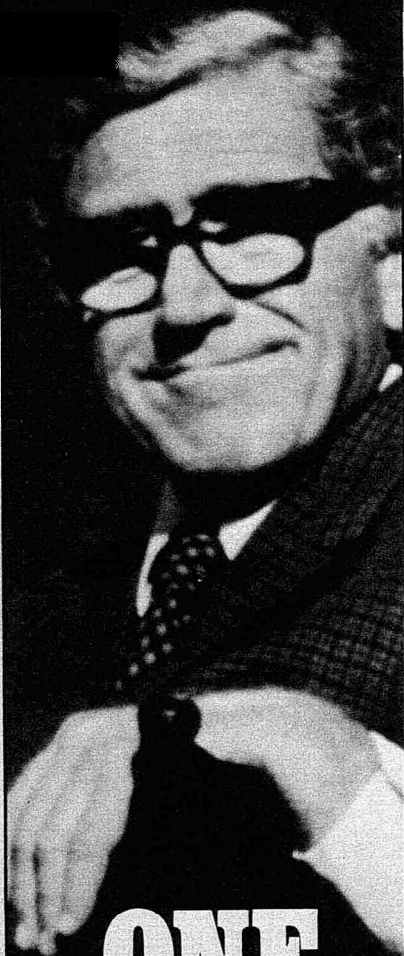


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nel and instituted on a regular basis for all new hires. Upon completion of the program and after a 90-day waiting period, the trainer sought to determine the impact of his training program on the customer-service people.

The manager of customer service refused to provide the trainer with any base data upon which to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the training. It was "none of his business." It would be bad enough if this were an isolated case. It is not. In fact, it is a widespread problem throughout the training industry.

Red Herring Syndrome

A second cause of the red herring syndrome and as important as poor organizational structure, is the lack of adequate skills on the part of the training and development department. Trainers (and indeed many consultants) do not realize that it is not the efficiency of their training which is ultimately evaluated, but its effectiveness. The training impact on the world of work. Many of our colleagues are quite skillful at the tactics of training, e.g. presentation skills, task analysis, program design, delivery systems, and other training tactics. The real gains in the development of effective training are made not at the tactical, but at the strategic level. The decisions which must be made before course development. Training needs analysis, front-end analysis, performance analysis, call it what you will. The best training program design in the world would not have achieved any measurable results with the operators in the paper manufacturing plant mentioned earlier. The most sophisticated computer delivery system integrated into video disc or slide-tape audio-visual training systems, no matter how cleverly or brilliantly conceived could have impacted that problem. One must be able to identify the positive and negative factors affecting human performance before beginning to design any training delivery system.

We must learn from Dr. Thomas Gilbert who first applied the concepts of behavioral psychology to the world of work. We must study

Dr. Meager who further explored this field. And Joe Harless, who popularized the concept of front-end analysis. Criterion Reference Instruction is useless if we cannot correct environmental factors that will effectively destroy the training effort.

Many of us fail to look beyond the symptom. It's not that we don't care. It's simply that we don't know. We don't possess the skill to analyze the problem and to develop the proper strategic approach prior to designing a training program.

Undoubtedly there are many other factors not considered in this brief article. Nor is it possible within the constraints placed upon anyone writing for a professional publication to enumerate all of the subsets within the two major categories outlined herein. It is also not within the province of most trainers to redesign the training function within their respective organizations.

What, then, can trainers do to resolve the problem of missing the mark and responding to felt rather than real needs? One thing we can certainly do is learn the strategic skills of analyzing training problems. We can read Dr. Thomas Gilbert's "Human Competence," McGraw Hill, 1978, we can attend the Praxis Performance Analysis Workshops. We can attend the Harless Performance Guild Workshops, we can attend Dr. Meager's workshops in Instructional Systems Design, we can learn first of all how to be good at our craft.

Once we are skillful at analyzing training problems, *and* developing efficient training programs to respond to the real needs of our client organizations, we can then begin to address the problem of organizational structure and change. We can begin to move our various organizations toward a more performance and productivity oriented structure. One that places the training function in solid control of employee training and . . . performance.

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