

AT GENERAL TELEPHONE CO., A JOINT EFFORT COMBINED THE SKILLS OF THREE DEPARTMENTS: TRAINING, LABOR RELATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS. THE COLLABORATION PRODUCED TWO ½-HOUR VIDEOTAPE TRAINING PROGRAMS . . . AND HERE'S HOW IT WAS DONE.

DRAMA IN HUMAN RELATIONS

BY ALEX TICE

Courtroom drama receives rave notices on television. Viewers vicariously share the anxiety of the witnesses, the finesse of the attorneys, and the triumph of justice.

Somewhat reticent, however, are the thousands of management and hourly employees who find themselves engaged in the very real circumstances of the industrial courtroom: an arbitration hearing. Often with little or no firsthand experience, these individuals are now the characters in a drama without scripts or direction. The consequences of individual actions — or inactions — are now manifest. What better method to teach grievance and arbitration procedure than by that proven vehicle: the courtroom drama.

At General Telephone Co. of Florida, a two-part fictional dramatic series was developed to train managers in grievance and arbitration procedures. A joint effort combined the skills of three company departments: Training, Labor Relations and Public Affairs.

The collaboration produced two half-hour videotape training programs, "*A Matter of Fact: Arbitration and Grievance.*"

The Grievance program presents a fictional case history illustrating typical personnel problems and grievance procedures. Arbitration features a courtroom drama — the arbitration — which carries the grievance case to its conclusion.

Audience reception has been enthusiastic. Supervisors viewing the grievance program relate to the real-life situation, recognizing strengths and weaknesses in themselves and their peers. The arbitration program is equally valuable in capturing the environment of an arbitration in the physical as well as emotional setting.

Outside the classroom, both programs find extensive use in the Labor Relations Department. The arbitration program is frequently part of prearbitration briefings while both programs are used in field meetings with small groups of managers.

Teaching management employees grievance and arbitration formality and procedure as well as the

importance and consequences of related individual action were the specific aims of the program to be used in formal two-day labor-relations classes. By using the dramatic format to provide familiar surroundings and establishing realistic conflict, the program would engage the viewer and present the training material with maximum impact.

Objectives

To gain interest, the technique of dramatic conflict was chosen to illustrate specific teaching objectives. Before the plot could be constructed, however, it was essential to clarify the program's overall training objectives. Two broad areas in supervisory labor relations emerged: the grievance procedure itself and the subsequent arbitration procedure, immediately suggesting a two-part dramatic series. Three specific supervisory skills to be emphasized were identified:

1. *Counseling* — how to properly review an employee's performance and proper conduct of a counseling session.

"SINCE HIRING FULL-TIME ACTORS FELL BEYOND THE MEANS OF THE BUDGET, VARIOUS COMMUNITY-THEATER GROUPS WERE CONTACTED FOR QUALIFIED ACTORS WHO WOULD BE WILLING TO PERFORM FOR A NOMINAL FEE."

2. *Documentation* — the value of accurate documentation in every phase of labor relations from corrective discipline to arbitration.

3. *Communication* — the importance of frank, open communication on all levels of supervisor/subordinate relationships.

The grievance procedure was to be outlined step by step, from acceptance of the grievance through second and third-step grievance meetings. Finally, the arbitration formalities — examination of witnesses, testimony, documents and procedure were to be examined in depth.

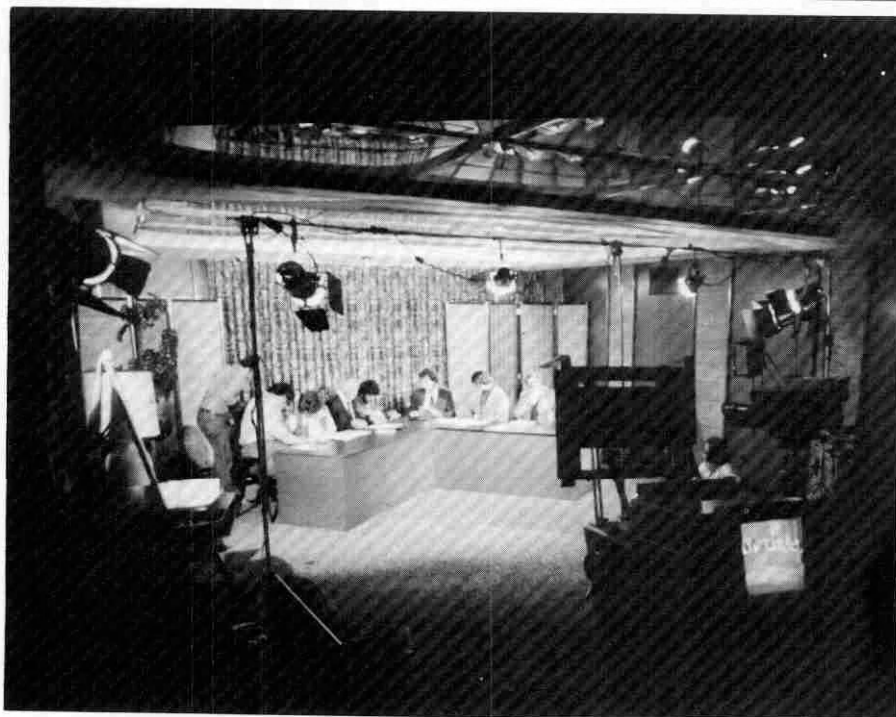
Thus, teaching objectives directed the program's thrust. The development of the conflict could begin.

The plot is based on a fictitious employee/supervisor conflict. The employee has a history of report-

ing late, leaving early and offering weak defenses. The supervisor warns and watches, but neglects to properly document infractions and follow labor-relations procedures. Hostilities mount. The situation builds to a pressure point over a charge of falsifying company records, resulting in a physical confrontation and an ambiguous dismissal. The conflicting accounts of the dismissal lead to union allegations, subsequent grievance hearings and finally, arbitration.

Technique

"Actuality," the "You Are There" approach, is used in the opening of the arbitration program. An off-camera narrator provides a background of the case and sets the scene for the approaching drama. In reporter fashion, the narrator addresses the principals who speak directly to the camera.



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Through this candid dialogue with the arbitrator and two opposing counsels, the viewer perceives the issue, points of view and formality of the proceedings. As the arbitration begins, the viewer identifies with the arbitrator, receiving subjective information through examination, testimony, and submitted documents. The approach requires each viewer to observe what effect documentation, communication, knowledge of procedure, and other factors may have on an arbitrator's decision.

The Grievance program, on the other hand, achieves objective exposition through the re-creation of events discussed during the arbitration. Each meeting, each conversation, each confrontation is witnessed in its entirety. The viewer, then, becomes omniscient.

Through the re-creation of actual events, the viewer can judge intent, spoken word, and action, and relate it to the accuracies or inaccuracies of arbitration testimony. This in-depth picture allows the viewer to focus on the methods

of the discipline and grievance procedures and emphasizes the importance of each action in a chain of interrelated events.

Production

To avoid recognizable personalities within the company and to insure convincing portrayals of the 14 characters in the two programs, outside talent was required. Since hiring full-time actors fell beyond the means of the budget, various community-theater groups were contacted for qualified actors who would be willing to perform for a nominal fee. Evening auditions were scheduled and videotaped to provide a reference for final casting. Audition material included several segments from the scripts containing dialogue that would characterize each of the 14 roles.

When casting was completed, the entire cast was assembled for a reading of both scripts. At this meeting, each actor received a handout containing: a copy of each script, taping schedule, complete list of the cast, a descriptive list of characters, a suggested wardrobe, and a talent-release form. Because most of the actors held full-time jobs, auditions and the first reading of the script were held on evenings. Subsequent rehearsals and videotaping dates were scheduled for Saturdays.

Four Saturdays were required: one for a complete rehearsal including blocking and role characterization; the second to videotape the two grievance meetings; the arbitration was taped on the third Saturday; and the final date was scheduled for taping the flashback scenes.

Locations included two conference rooms for taping the grievance meetings and arbitration hearing, and a field work center for taping the interior and exterior flashback scenes. Two color cameras, four lavalier microphones and a shotgun microphone were used for the production. Production technique was film-style using multiple camera setups for master segments, and recording cut-aways or closeups to be inserted when editing.

A total of seven people comprised the production crew, which

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included: a director, video engineer, audio engineer, floor director, floorman and two cameramen.

Representatives from the Training and Labor Relations Departments were responsible for observing each scene for accuracy. Scenes which contained unacceptable interpretations, or ad-libbed material, were reshot.

For continuity and editing purposes, each scene was divided into segments and slated. When taping was completed, a protection copy of each cassette was made. This protection copy was viewed to time segments and prepare an editing log. One day was required for editing each of the two programs.

Utilization

In the formal three-day Labor Relations class, the Arbitration program, accompanied by a hand-out containing all exhibits introduced in the hearing is shown first; the Grievance program, second. This order insures that all participants remain objective, receiving

the facts just as the arbitrator would from witnesses' testimony and submitted documents.

After viewing the Arbitration program, classes are divided into three groups: one summarizing the company's argument, another summarizing for the union, and the third acting as the arbitrator. After the case is reviewed in this manner, specific teaching objectives (communication, documentation, supervisory strengths and weaknesses) are discussed. Since no decision or award is made by the arbitrator, participants are encouraged to reach their own conclusions regarding the outcome of the case.

The next step is to evaluate these conclusions by viewing the major events of the case as reconstructed in the Grievance program.

Through the Grievance program, participants observe the development of the case by viewing: the actual scenes of conflict leading

to and including the discharge; the acceptance of the grievance; and second and third-step grievance meetings. By objectively viewing these events, participants can compare the subjective testimony of arbitration to the actual event.

After discussing the teaching objectives of the Grievance program, class participants role-play various scenes to learn and reinforce proper procedures and methods of dealing with labor-relations situations.

Summary

The value of the Arbitration and Grievance programs is demonstrated by both demand and utilization. As word of the programs spread, supervisors asked to enroll in the labor-relations classes. Even after attending the class, many supervisors have asked to enroll a second time.

The instructors, naturally, are pleased with the discussion generated and the positive response. As a result of instructor/participant evaluation, the format of the labor-relations course was revised.

The Grievance and Arbitration programs are now core material and the basis of all related instruction.

Participants and instructors both agree that drama contributes significantly to the success and acceptance of the labor-relations programs. For, in training, our purpose is to motivate people to thought or action.

And what better way to engage participants and motivate them than through the drama and emotion of real-life situations.

Alex Tice is public affairs coordinator for General Telephone Co. of Florida. In addition to his editorial responsibilities within the company, he also develops training programs and assigns personnel for training in his department. The author of a monthly public-relations column for area newspapers, he is a member of ASTD and is on the advisory council for the Society's Media Division.

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