

CONSULTANTS' SHOWCASE

BEHAVIOR TRAINING: REFINING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN AN INDUSTRIAL SETTING

BY ROBERT H. KEPPLER

In this age of scientific, computer-assisted management, one management skill has assumed a special importance. That skill is the art of communication.

In an industrial setting, if communications between worker and supervisor become garbled, productivity can suffer. Thus, when RF Communications, a 1,700-employee manufacturing firm in Rochester, N.Y., wanted to improve the human relations skills of its first-line supervisors, the intangibles of communication became tangible program goals.

The company, a division of the Harris Corp., manufactures short and long-range radio-communications systems. These systems range from police hand-held radios to complete communications networks designed for developing countries.

RF commissioned an international management consultant organization, PA International, to conduct an eight-week, 64-hour behavioral training program for 20 supervisors from its manufacturing division. The participants were selected at random from different specialties, including quality control, manufacturing, engineering, testing and production.

The Problem

What was the impetus for the program? Explains Don Murray, RF's director of personnel, "The particular problem was that shop-

floor workers were reluctant to talk about problems — work-related or nonwork-related — with their supervisors." It was felt that if communications barriers were removed, it would be less likely that workers would look to an external source to redress their grievances.

Notes Robert Sturgeon, vice president of RF's manufacturing division, "I couldn't allow the problem to continue. In fact, the program we developed was aimed at creating an awareness among the supervisors that the prime respon-

sibility for good relations rests with them."

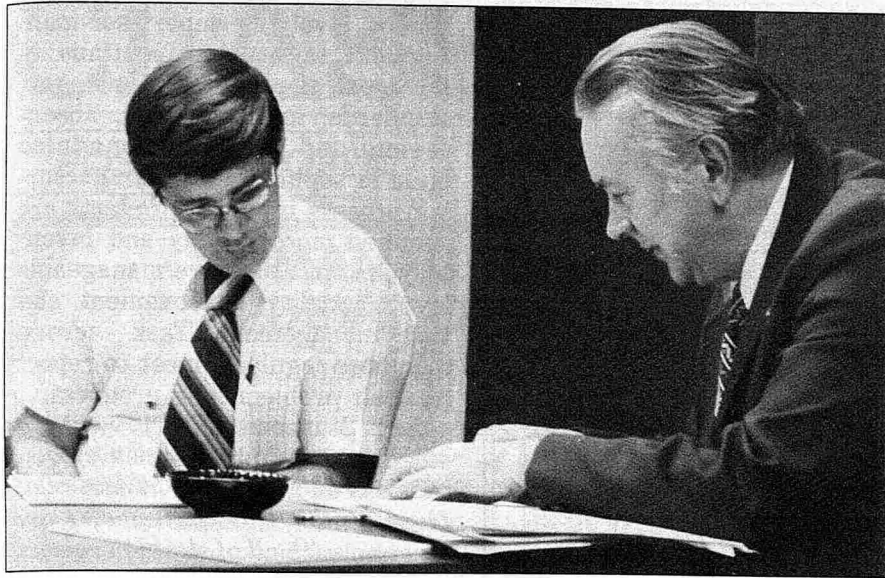
Until the PA International program was implemented, training was theoretical in nature. Says Sturgeon, "What we wanted to stress, then, was the human side of supervision, as opposed to a formula approach. Naturally, we'll still use the standard management courses. They're fine. But I felt that a more personal approach to solving the communications problem was required."

The Role of the Consultant

Why did RF choose a consulting



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firm for this behavior training program? The answer can be summed up in a single word: credibility.

"The supervisors felt that an impartial consultant gave them an opportunity to speak more freely and candidly about the problems they face," Sturgeon says. *"And it's easier to accept the facts concerning what it takes to be a good supervisor from a third party. In addition, had the program been designed by in-house personnel, the participants may have felt it had been slanted by individuals or special-interest groups within the company."*

The concept on which the training program has been based is participative management. It's an approach that allows the parties involved to define the problems and reach mutually agreeable solutions through informal discussions and consensus. The consultant serves as a catalyst, guiding the discussions to the final solutions.

Participative management has long been part of Europe's negotiating history. The technique is beginning to take hold in this country, particularly in the industrial relations area.

The Process

During the eight-week program, participants met for four hours, twice a week in a conference room that was isolated from normal shop-floor distractions. Sessions were augmented by a specially authored course manual and audio-

visual aids. One consultant served as instructor/mentor. Two company employee-relations specialists also participated in the program to become acquainted with the techniques. These individuals were learning how to create and teach the program for future use on an in-house basis.

Employee-relations specialist Iris Kortela describes the session's format:

"First, we would be given hand-outs relating to the topic of the day's session — be it motivation, understanding behavior, decision-making or time management. The instructor then would spend about 30 minutes talking informally about the topic on a 'what would you do if . . . ' basis. Two role-playing exercises followed that discussion period, again relating to the day's topic. Scenarios covered the problems of productivity, discrimination and absenteeism."

The Results

There was an unexpected benefit of the program that may well be its most impressive result, Sturgeon maintains. *"Perhaps the biggest benefit of the program was that the supervisors improved communication among themselves. They got to the point where they could say to each other, 'You're really not doing what you're supposed to — and here's how it affects me.'"*

Thus, the program allowed participants to see their problems as

company problems, beyond their specific function or department.

A second benefit concerns the perception of the supervisor's abilities on a subjective and an objective basis. Says Sturgeon, *"We have one supervisor who has a lot of responsibility. But an objective measurement of his strengths and weaknesses shows he is socially oriented — almost to excess. But now, I am on guard about his selection of workers. Does he choose them on the basis of the individual's merits or because he likes the person? The objective evaluation helps me to guide that supervisor in his hiring."*

For the program to be effective, a significant amount of time must be set aside. Indeed, the 10-12 hours a week that participants devoted to the course and to course-related projects adds up to 25 per cent of the supervisor's work week.

One participant explains, *"I think all of us involved with the course found it extremely worthwhile, even though we were away from the shop floor for considerable periods of time. In fact, my boss got to the point of practically turning green each time I said I had to attend the course."*

Adds Sturgeon, *"Supervisors came to me and asked, 'Do you really want me to take all this time away from my job? If I'm not out there on the shop floor, I'm afraid things won't get done.' But we stuck to our commitment and everything worked out."*

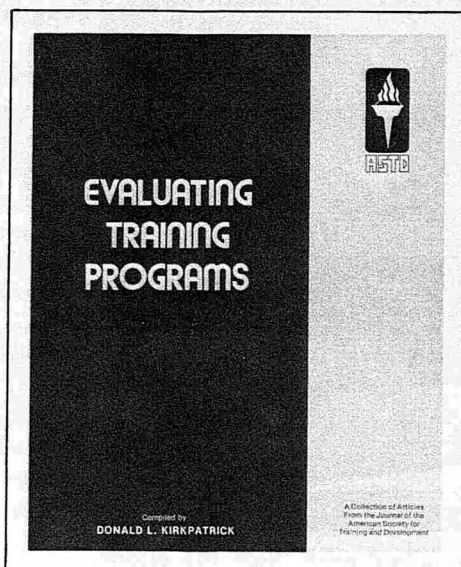
Future Applications

Now that RF has this initial experience under its belt, plans call for a streamlining of the course to limit the amount of time supervisors are off the shop floor. Future courses, in addition, would be administered by company professionals.

To limit the amount of time supervisors are away from their jobs, consideration has been given to devising a more flexible course timetable. For instance, course time could be gleaned by taking a half-hour at the end of the day, plus a half-hour of the supervisor's own time.

Additionally, project work

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groups involving supervisor-management task teams continue in the areas of communications, test standards, merit reviews, absenteeism and tardiness, modular build (a sophisticated manufacturing process in which products are supplied more rapidly and inventory is kept at a more manageable level), quality improvement and time management. Task - group members regularly meet to report on their problems and progress.

Says Sturgeon, "This project is a starting point for a series of discussions on improving human relations skills. For instance, I am meeting with all of the supervisors on a regular basis to discuss specific gripes."

Comments Kortela, "The times definitely have changed. Nobody responds to or respects the old platitudes. What you learn is what you can relate to and what you can absorb. If the concepts are put in a framework that is familiar and meaningful to you, it's more likely that you'll learn and apply them."

By addressing an industrial problem in a way that reflects the concerns of the individuals involved, solutions become a less threatening obstacle. And through that process, the communication message can be clarified.

With 1,000 professionals in 23 countries, PA International Management Consultants is among the world's largest consulting firms. The company has a "federation" of consultant companies throughout Europe, Australia and the Far East, along with a U.S. company with offices in New York and Chicago. In addition to management consulting, PA is active in executive search, computers and telecommunications, science and technology and industrial education.

Robert H. Keppler is a vice president of PA. He first joined PA's United Kingdom operation in 1967. Now operating from PA's New York headquarters, he is actively involved with the industrial relations sector of the firm's U.S. operations, using the participative management approach to introducing and managing change.

For additional information concerning PA International's participative management training programs, please contact: PA International, 200 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.