SYRUPY SWEET

a critical examination of training approaches for supervisors of minority group workers and the "hard-core"

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Black poetry is not taught in American schools. Few white people know the opening lines to Langston Hughes's "Lenox Avenue Mural" and fewer understand.

HARLEM

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? [1]

"They sent me a couple of colored boys to start delivering the merchandise. I don't know what the customers are going to say, but I know that my men don't like it. Next they'll be making foremen out of them." Every organization must decide how it will respond to this challenge. Comments like this are not rare.

American organizations have been exercising their social consciences. Although many critics question the motives of industries that are hiring minority group members and the "hard-core" unemployed, questioning motives does not prove to be fruitful.

The fact is that American industry and business, regardless of motives, are making a serious attempt to hire, train and offer careers to minority group members and those identified as the "hard-core" unemployed. In doing so, a tradition of conscious and unconscious racism and class distinctions has to be dealt with and, if possible, eliminated. Much of this activity has focused on the supervisor who has immediate contact with the new employee.

THE TWO FACES OF RACISM

Recent work with supervisors has indicated that we are not dealing with a single phenomenon but with two factors that, although interdependent, can be isolated for analysis. It is helpful to distinguish between prejudice and discrimination.

Prejudice - Gordon Allport in *The Nature of Prejudice* defines prejudice as, "an assertive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group."[2] Thus, If I expect a scientist to be impractical because he is a scientist, I am prejudiced. It I expect a Puerto Rican to be lazy or energetic because he is a Puerto Rican, I am prejudiced. The judgments in both instances are based upon the individual's membership in a group rather than the individual himself.

Discrimination - Related to prejudice, but of a different dimension, discrimination refers to the way a person behaves towards another individual. So, if I behave differently towards a white man than towards a Negro because of color, then I am discriminating. If I act tough with a foreman because he is a foreman, then I am discriminating. If I insist that a trainee call me "Sir" but do not ask my secretary to, then I am discriminating. Obviously, discrimination can be good or bad depending on the basis for discrimination.

Thus, prejudice refers to how an individual expects another to behave; discrimination refers to how a person behaves towards another. These are limited definitions of the words and are offered to provide a framework for this discussion. Prejudicial and discriminatory behavior as social phenomena deserve much more discussion than can be given here. However, separating the two can help us to analyze situations and subsequently select change strategies.

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

As expectations and behavior become sanctioned and accepted by a social unit, we begin to observe what has been called institutional racism and class consciousness. The social system sanctions, formally or informally, certain expectations and behavior, reinforces their occurrence, and rewards their manifestation.

Business and industry have often been guilty of institutionalizing racist expectations and behavior without being aware of it. Personnel departments that place Appalachian migrants in dead-end jobs without career potential because of prejudgments about the abilities of mountain people are guilty. Supervisors who call their black workers "boy" are guilty. The advertising industry that refused to use black faces or even acknowledge that Negroes existed was guilty. And, more recently the affluent manager who angrily asks, "What do these people want?" is guilty.

As these expectations and behavior are sanctioned by the system, they result in institutionalized racism. Jim Crow laws in the South were formal manifestations of it; the absence of Negro supervisors in business is often an informal manifestation of institutionalized racism.

An encouraging sign is that many organizations have recognized this reality and are attempting to overcome the problems that have surfaced. As minority group members and formerly unemployable workers are moving into industry, a conscious attempt is being made to eliminate the institutionalized sets of expectations and patterns of behavior that are dysfunctional and destructive.

APPROACHES TO TRAINING SUPERVISORS

Called upon to intervene into systems that have institutionalized prejudice and discriminatory behavior, training and development staffs have designed a variety of programs for supervisors. Whether or not supervisors should be the primary target is a separate question that will not be considered here. There is general recognition that at some point supervisors must be involved.

Unfortunately, many of the programs being presented to supervisors, however well-intentioned, unwittingly reinforce prejudicial expectations and discriminatory behavior. Some programs even introduce prejudice and discrimination. It is important to critically examine the general thrusts of these programs and to

consider alternative approaches.

Generally, two categories encompass the majority of programs that have been designed for supervisors. The first type uses some form of confrontation and assumes that if the supervisor develops insight as a result of his confrontation, he will be less antagonistic towards the new workers.

The second approach depends upon inputs designed to educate the supervisor concerning the life styles of people living in the ghetto. The assumption is that if the supervisor understands the environment of the worker, he will be better able to supervise him. Sometimes one program will draw upon both approaches.

CONFRONTATION APPROACH

The first approach, confrontation, may appear in many forms, but it usually involves the creation of a situation where the supervisor comes face to face with a member of a minority group (literally or symbolically) who tells the supervisor what it is like to belong to that minority group in a white world and what his feelings are towards the white world that perpetuates the situation. Often exercises are designed in which the supervisor has the opportunity to role play or in some way empathize with the minority group member. The goal is for the supervisor to confront his own prejudices, gain insight concerning their causes, and become aware of the impact of his discriminatory behavior. The ultimate goal is for the supervisor to change his attitudes and subsequently change his "on-the-job" behavior as a result of his experiences in the training session.

Several difficulties exist with the use of confrontation programs for supervisors. An examination of these begins to indicate new directions that should be explored.

1. Confrontation programs depend upon a high degree of emotional exchange if they are to succeed. However, this emotional turmoil can reinforce the most recent stereotyping of Negroes and Puerto Ricans as angry,

hostile, violent people. Judging whether or not these feelings are valid when surfaced is irrelevant. The fact is that a supervisor who enters an encounter session with a stereotype of minority group members as overly emotional and hostile may, by the very nature of the encounter experience, have that stereotype reinforced. A corollary problem with encounter techniques growing out of the emotional nature of the sessions is the competence of the staff. Simply, competent trainers are expensive and hard to find.

2. The behavior that is reinforced during the encounter group is most likely dysfunctional on the job. Interpersonal engagement on a job is not the same as interpersonal engagement in an encounter group. This is notably different from the Grid program or many T-group situations where the focus is on appropriate behavior. Since the encounter session is concerned with attitude change rather than with behavior, follow-up to develop supervisory skills is practically impossible. The translation of attitude change into supervisory behavior is usually not considered.

3. The nature of the encounter group used to ease racial tension invites polarization. Assuming that supervisors stereotype minority groups, the stereotype with which a supervisor enters the program may be changed, but the polarized nature of the group produces a new stereotype rather than individualization.

4. One of the most damaging criticisms of confrontation programs is aimed at the manipulative and coercive overtones that are often present. It does not matter whether or not the supervisor's perception of the program as manipulative is legitimate or not. If he perceives the program as manipulative or coercive, for him it is.

These criticisms are not intended to apply to all encounter group experi-

ences or to the whole realm of "sensitivity" training. Simply, they refer to the appropriateness of confrontation programs for supervisors in the business or industrial setting. Encounter groups for personal growth and development are highly valuable and organizations may want to provide voluntary opportunities for staff members to participate in such programs. However, as a method of organizationally responding to institutionalized prejudices and discriminatory behavior, more appropriate techniques must be developed.

EDUCATION APPROACH

The second approach that is being used in training the supervisors of the new work force, and probably the most popular, can be called educational. Again, there are many different kinds of programs, but they do tend to cluster around certain content areas. They usually try to teach the supervisor something about the difficulties of living in a ghetto, the language patterns currently used by ghetto people, the words to avoid when talking with the new workers, and often something of the sociopolitical structure of the ghetto. These programs assume that the supervisor will reject the new worker because of his different life style caused by a disadvantaged background. The goal, therefore, is to expose the supervisor to the new workers' environment in a controlled setting so the supervisor will know what to expect from the new worker and be prepared to respond. As the supervisor begins to learn about the environment of his new workers, he will begin to develop understanding and sympathy for the new worker and will consequently be more tolerant of deviant behavior and will learn new ways of supervising his disadvantaged workers. The educational programs offer the supervisor a documented rationale for being more tolerant and changing his behavior.

An examination of the specific content of these programs reveals a set of assumptions that are explicit as they appear in the courses; implicit statements are also being made. In this re-

gard, it must be remembered that the supervisor lives in a larger social system. The recent Gallup research reported in the October 6, 1969 issue of *Newsweek* becomes significant. Forty-four percent of those white middle-class individuals who were questioned felt that a Negro had a BETTER chance than they did to get well-paying jobs.[3] With data such as this available, one must seriously consider the implicit assumptions that can be read into the educational programs that are being presented to supervisors.

1. **Explicit:** Because these people come from a different culture, they will use a different language that you may not understand. To supervise them, you must learn their meanings of words such as "oreo" and "dude."

   Implicit: These people have their own way of talking that is childish, but if you learn to talk the way they do, you will be able to supervise them and they will like you. Eventually, they will discard their secretive language and adopt yours.

2. **Explicit:** There are certain words that you cannot use with members of minority groups because they are offensive to them and they will get mad if you use them. "Boy" and "Nigger" are two such words; "Spic" is another. (Polack, Mick, Wop, and Hunkie are not mentioned.)

   Implicit: Unlike white people, minority group members are sensitive and must be treated with kid gloves or they may get violent. You must bend over backward not to offend them.

3. **Explicit:** This is the first real job that this person has had, and you cannot expect him to know certain things like punching a time clock, being on time and maintaining a good attendance record. In time they may learn how to do such things.

   Implicit: These people have never worked before, are lazy, and don't want to work the way that you do. You will have to make allowances for them and baby them for a while.

They aren't capable of being a productive worker right now.

4. **Explicit:** Coming from a crisis world of drug users, alcoholics, broken families and deprivation, these people see the world differently than you do and they will not respond the same way to various situations as you would respond. They will not see any urgency in production schedules, nor will threats of disciplinary action disturb them.

   Implicit: These people are uncivilized. They have never been taught proper values and behavior. You have to tolerate a great deal from them.

5. **Explicit:** Minority group members have a different life style than you do. They dress differently, don't have the same manners, treat each other without any respect, have their own heroes, possess their own social life and want different things than you do.

   Implicit: These people are immature. They don't know how to behave properly, and you will have to teach them basic things. But be careful because they stick together. You just have to put up with a difficult situation.

Obviously, not all of these assumptions exist in every program, but many of them do appear quite frequently, and trainers must be aware that the implicit assumptions are being communicated along with the explicit ones. This can be caused by two dynamics. First, it is possible that the assumptions designated as implicit are actually explicit in the program through the use of materials, the structure of the course, or the attitudes of the training staff.

Secondly, the implicit assumptions may be what the supervisor responds to after he has sifted the program through his own perceptual screen. Setting aside the question of whether or not these assumptions, explicit and implicit, are valid, do they help the supervisor develop his work force?

ROLE OF EXPECTATIONS

Research in education has shown the effect of expectations on performance. When teachers are told that a group of students are above average in ability, teachers behave in such a way that students perform above average even though they may only have average tested ability. The reverse has also been demonstrated. When teachers are told that their groups are below average in ability, the groups turn in below average performances. The self-fulfilling prophecy is a demonstrable fact. By teaching foremen to expect below average performances from minority group members, trainers not only reinforce their prejudices, but also create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rather than demanding full performance, minimal behavior will be accepted and rewarded. The supervisor is not entirely to blame for this. The training program may have taught him this behavior. Regardless, neither the supervisor nor the employee is helped. Thus, even if one accepts the assumptions that are presented in the training programs, there is no productive result.

We don't accept the assumptions. Although it is true that an individual's environment may constrain him from reaching his full potential, the assumption that someone who is from an economically deprived environment is more impaired than anyone else is dangerous. As one begins to list those who are functioning effectively in industry today, one constantly encounters people from poverty, from broken families and from groups frustrated by prejudice.

GENERAL ASSUMPTIONS

The danger is not in condemning poverty and the impact that it has on individuals but in making predictions about individuals because they come from poverty. When one tries to generalize about individuals from the limited data that they are members of a minority group or have a background of economic deprivation, the chances for accuracy are rare. There are simply too many

intervening variables. Nevertheless, many programs designed to train supervisors of minority group members state, explicitly or implicitly, that due to race or environment you can make assumptions about an individual's behavior.

To consider another paradox, the implication in many supervisory programs is that supervising "these people" is more difficult than supervising other "minority" groups. Yet there are those in industry who would far rather supervise an interracial group than a research group of Ph.D.'s for a whole range of reasons.

Training and personnel specialists have other assumptions they may want to use rather than the ones previously stated. In fact, if the following assumptions are employed appropriately throughout the system and reinforced through training and rewards, institutional racism could become a bad memory from the past.

1. Douglas MacGregor's Theory Y which simply states that people generally have a desire to be involved in a process of growth. The real key to effectiveness is not pushing, pressuring, cajoling or sympathizing people out of their present patterns of behavior; rather, effectiveness is achieved by releasing and challenging the creativity and potentiality that exists.

2. Dr. Kenneth Clark's statement: "I am not too sanguine about the social worker approach. Again, this is sort of condescending, this is sort of looking upon these people as some inferior kind of people or some second class people rather than what they are — people that have been short-changed by the institutions which should have trained them as efficiently as they trained other people whom you don't use your social workers for."[4]

It is difficult to reconcile the assumptions of immature behavior with the civil rights workers who reversed the cultural patterns of the Southern United States. Was it irresponsibility, unde-

pendability and immaturity that enabled them to refrain from physical violence while being attacked by police, fire hoses and dogs? Some might want to reexamine their assumptions concerning the ability of blacks to follow rules by investigating the rigorous behavior pattern followed by the Black Muslims.

When one associates immaturity and lack of self-discipline with poverty or race, the contradictions grow rapidly. Forced by institutional racism to use entertainment and athletics for economic growth and personal expression, the black man in America has a history which screams a contradiction to what trainers and programs are telling white supervisors. And white Americans know the entertainers and the athletes. The contradiction becomes louder as the full history of the black man in America becomes known. Perhaps industrial leaders would do better to ask questions concerning the adequacies of their systems to train people in skills, to create performance review systems that are equitable and to raise some real questions within the corporate structure about dead end streets and "showcase blacks."

A THIRD APPROACH

One approach that appears to avoid the dangers that have been presented concentrates on appropriate supervisory behavior rather than on attitudes. An organization that is using this approach reports encouraging results. Basically, their training program presents the following frame of reference to their supervisors:

1. The labor market is a dynamic, changing phenomenon that every organization must respond to. You as a supervisor must be able to realistically manage these changes and be able to develop effective work teams from individuals with a great variety of backgrounds, talents, and life styles.

2. As an organization, we are responsible for furnishing you with workers who are capable of performing at standards that help you to meet your

goals. However, your responsibility as a supervisor is to provide on-the-job training and supervision that encourages each worker to develop his capacities and potential for a career with our organization.

3. Each worker is a unique individual who defies being placed in any stereotype. Our organization attempts to respond to each worker as an individual, but the supervisor has the greatest responsibility for carrying this out.

4. Every individual will respond favorably to supervision that challenges his ability and is fair while being demanding. Your responsibility is to provide your work team with the best supervision that you are capable of.

5. The program that has been designed provides the opportunity for our supervisors to develop and expand their supervisory skills.

The training program is an instrumented, action design conducted by the organization's trainers. As they develop supervisory skills, participants work through a variety of cases, role plays, and questionnaires that involve a wide range of workers and situations. These activities are programmed to meet definite design specifications:

1. **Associative Learning** - The racial attitudes of the participants are never directly confronted in the design. Instead, associative learning is used to train the supervisor to use appropriate behavior when working with members of minority groups. To accomplish this, the design presents situations involving members of minority groups to occur with successful supervisory behavior by the participants. This defuses the, "It won't work with them," attitude.

Consequently, the rewards offered by the design link appropriate supervisory behavior with all workers including, but not especially, members of minority groups.

2. **Problem-Solving Context** - There are emotionally-charged situations in the program, but they are presented as problems that the supervisor has to solve. The entire course trains the supervisor to develop his ability to solve problems and to use that ability. In fact, the situations are designed in such a way that if the supervisor does not set objectives, gather data, explore and test alternatives regardless of race, he can't solve the problem. He must focus on the real issues to be successful. Since most of the situations involve team activity, it is necessary for each member of the team to behave appropriately if the team is to succeed. The appropriate behavior is rational, problem-solving behavior. As the program progresses through the week, situations incrementally become more complex, realistic, and emotionally charged.

On the last day, teams are applying problem-solving approaches to highly-charged situations involving attacks and counterattacks about discrimination.

3. **Focus on Supervisor** - Rather than being concerned with "those people" and "their problems," the course concentrates on the supervisor and his ability to respond appropriately to a variety of situations. Projection, often complaining or griping behavior, is extinguished because it does not contribute to the solution of the problems that the participants must work on. The only behavior that is useful comes from the application of communication and problem-solving skills. Throughout the program, the

spotlight is on the supervisor. He is given status as a problem-solver capable of handling a variety of situations, and he receives feedback on his performances. This design specification is dramatically different from worrying about "those people" and the problems "they" cause.

Whether or not this approach will prove to be the most effective is yet to be documented. Over two hundred participants have now been exposed to various parts of the program, and the initial reactions are encouraging but as yet anecdotal. However, the concept is notable for its avoidance of racist assumptions and discriminatory prescriptions.

REINFORCED RACISM?
The preoccupation of many programs with the social and psychological concerns of the "hard core" labor market may yield a certain satisfaction, and there may be personal growth in trying to understand the pathology of a social system that allows a ghetto to exist. However, the noose of institutional racism will probably not be loosened by these efforts. In fact, these efforts may reinforce the racism that exists. This brief examination is really a plea to program designers and trainers to reconsider the basic thrust of their efforts and to question their own assumptions.

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3. "The Troubled American: A Special Report on the White Majority,"*Newsweek*, Oct. 6, 1969, p. 45.

4. Kenneth Clark interviewed by Malcolm Shaw, June 28, 1968, Metropolitan Applied Research Offices, New York, N.Y.