How Do You Teach Managers To Think?

Both an art and a science, the characteristics of effective management are hard to pin down, even tougher to instill through training. The four management development and education experts featured here tell you what works in their companies.

A star character in the cast of contemporary HRD concerns, management development is fundamental to organization performance. How are the effects of changing technology, shifting demographics, government deregulation, heightened expectations, new markets and a fickle economy being managed in organizations?

Supervisors and first-line managers may not confront all of these complex influences in performing successfully from day to day. But how *do* these people learn to cope when such issues arise? Are the best managers directed by their intuitions? By their rational thinking?

The importance of boosting productivity and otherwise strengthening organizations to withstand the impact of change is stimulating the HRD community to identify characteristics of successful managers. At ASTD's management development forum (Washington, D.C., December 1984), senior HRD practitioners discussed what managers really need to know, how they learn, whether a generic model of management development exists, how training needs vary with functions, and what HRD can do to systematize the development of proficient managers.

It's too soon to say what answers will emerge from this dialogue, but the time is right for applying these questions to management development in your organization. This month, Four by Four contributors describe some strategies that yield results and offer insight about the alignment of management development responsibilities in their companies. Focusing predominantly on first-line managers and supervisors, the following discussions highlight the diversity of managers' jobs and the need for an individualized approach to management development.

"Management development tries to prepare people for the future . . . the best we can do is teach managers to be flexible and to make the best decisions they can based on available information."

John L. Kinman is vice president and director of personnel for U.S. Bancorp, in Portland, Ore.

Training directors talk about how people learn and the importance of combining on-the-job training with classroom instruction. Yet, companies have difficulty blending the two effectively. People enter organizations with degrees, many with MBAs, and it's years before they assume a position requiring the decision-making and analysis skills learned in business classes. Good reasons exist for the delay, but the value attached to seasoning and experience is hard to measure. On the other hand, getting experience often is at the expense of keeping knowledge current. Management development could be improved with programs that coalesce work experience and formal training.

Management development tries to prepare people for the future. The only problem is, we're not sure what the future looks like. Even in dealing with automation in traditional industries, we cannot crank out the ideal managers for the future. Instead, we develop the numbers and kinds of people to do the jobs the way we do them now. The best we can do is teach managers to be flexible and to make the best decisions they can based on available information.

The recommendations:

1. We should design programs that do a better job of blending work experience with classroom learning. Partnerships between universities and businesses are part of the solution. The night school accounting course I took 25 years ago really gave meaning to the debits and credits I dealt with in my job at the time. What we're trying to do with new management development programs is

complement formal course work with the work people are doing in their jobs. Being able to use knowledge on the job gives managers opportunities for the "Aha" experiences that bring meaning to textbook principles and develop the individual.

2. Job rotation is a controversial approach to management development. Some believe that rotation doesn't make sense for their operations, that a specialist in a given area is most satisfied and productive left there. Upper management, and those targeted for higher levels, need a broad experiential background and can benefit from rotation. The question here is how to keep the company running, with the best people in the right spots, while simultaneously providing them with varied learning experiences?

Assessment and selection of individuals for rotation assignments is a key consideration for rotation to be a valuable development strategy. Not all successful salespeople will be successful in general management, but some will. Rotation can give a person targeted for general management the varied exposure needed for the future position.

Though the rotation experience is productive in the long term, time spent away from the usual job may cost the company in the short term. As a result, selecting the right people in whom to make this development investment is a major determinant in how valuable it will be.

3. Management development must be strategic and long term in nature. Related to the difficulty of evaluating development efforts in the short term is the issue of decentralization of training and development. The trend is to decentralize, making human resources or personnel departments responsible for the planning and administration of training, and line managers responsible for the actual development of their people.

Fewer dollars might be spent this way, but the danger is that line managers tend to think in the short term, largely because they are evaluated that way. It's easy to forego training and development activities because they probably won't have a positive impact on this year's bottom line. A branch manager may see immediate value in putting a management trainee in a teller window instead of paying overtime or a new teller, but this may not be the best development experience for the new manager. Yes, the manager needs the experience, but how much?

In addition, middle managers are consumed with the day-to-day work of managing their units and meeting objectives. Not only are top managers less encumbered with these immediate pressures, they have more of the knowledge and vision about how jobs may change in the future. For these reasons, top management should be involved heavily in assessing management development needs and planning activities.

4. Too often, managers evaluate others' strengths and weaknesses in terms of what's worked best for them in the past, forgetting that combining varied input produces the best results. Reaching concensus on decisions and understanding each other may be easier among people who "speak the same language," but the best solutions aren't always the easiest. Bringing people with diverse styles and problem-solving frameworks into management, listening to them, and creating an atmosphere in which their input is expected and accepted as a contribution, teaches managers to think. Evaluating managers for results, rather than how results are achieved, also teaches managers to think. The emphasis on results affords managers some freedom to devise and implement their own solutions.

The onus for hiring and promoting varied talent and for creating a developmental atmosphere is on existing management.

"Managers aren't rational, objective people, and business itself isn't a rational operation."

Richie Herink is manager, technology management education, at IBM Corporation, White Plains, N.Y.

All managers are different. You can't send every manager through the same course for a surface treatment of "how to manage" and expect positive results. Some people are charismatic, dressed for success, articulate and creative; some are not. Anyone can succeed—or fail—as a manager. Managing is a heterogenous role with no simple answers. Some innovative changes in the ways we interact with line managers and supervisors, and in the way managers perceive their environment, can help develop rational thinking that fits the situation.

The recommendations:

1. Billions of dollars have been spent on management development in recent years, yet the competitive decline of U.S. industry seems to refute the efficacy of these efforts. A shift in responsibility, so that management development is grounded in human resources and implemented by line managers, instead of personnel, is a needed change. A person may be a "great guy," but does he know how to operate a business unit? Primary responsibility for developing managers should lie with the line individuals to whom those managers report. These are the people who have a detailed picture of what the jobs require, and what the managers in the jobs need to know and be able to do.

2. The best way to learn to manage is from experience. Talk to some of the greatest managers, and they'll tell you that they learned form their managers, not in schools, courses and other formal programs. Many of the most successful executives have no degree at all, but are successful because they learned their company and its business. Create learning experiences by giving challenging assignments, allowing the manager to fail, and then spending time examining why an approach failed. We don't give medical students a book on brain surgery and then tell them to dig in on an actual case! Neither should we expect managers to handle all challenges successfully without experience.

A problem with management development is that no one knows exactly what a manager's job is. Rather, we've sought roles or models to follow and in which we attempt to mold others. Henry Mintzberg and Rosemary Stewart say that no two management jobs are alike—they're different from one another and the same job varies from day to day. Variations in learning and leadership styles, circumstances, organizational cultures, environmental influences and company structure dictate the need for individualized management development.

Viewing the whole company as a vehicle for learning experiences sharpens thinking. Using the city of Philadelphia as a classroom, students from the Parkway School Program learned about art and biology at museums, went to the airport and government agencies to see how those operations work and to other places that provide learning experiences. Likewise, the organization is a tremendous learning laboratory for people, politics and business, for learning what works in that system, and why.

Managers aren't rational, objective people, and business itself isn't a rational operation. Unpredictable human differences are always at work, forming the political component. Who's behind an idea often makes a difference in whether or not that idea succeeds.

3. Start management development with selection, and pick people with an interest in management. They'll learn a lot on their own. If you're motivated, you look for learning opportunities, which includes learning from observing others.

Another selection consideration is how to select and develop a technical or professional expert for management. A cliche says that an outstanding technical person will make a poor manager. I disagree with this. A good engineer is likely to develop into a good manager because his or her staff will be supportive and less inclined to question the manager's credibility or knowledge. IBM's parallel ladders for managers and professionals make both paths attractive. People need to keep current in their fields to make good decisions as managers, and we attach no stigma to migration into and out of management. A manager may elect to move into a professional position for a variety of reasons: to keep expertise current, to earn more money, the job seems more interesting, or the person may wish to relocate. Migrating is an aspect of growth. We believe we can get the best from our managers by allowing opportunities for individual growth and change in this way.

4. Not to be ignored as a bona-fide aspect of growth is involvement outside the job, through family, friends, hobbies and other interests. Not only does outside involvement require good time management, but such pursuits also may reinforce the same kind of analytical thinking that is useful on the job. Or maybe outside activities simply enable a person to "clear his head" and approach problems from fresh, new perspectives.

"If I could change just one thing about management development, it would be to have the complete involvement and commitment from all levels of management to develop subordinates on the job, not just rely on classroom training."

Wendy M. Labreche is supervisor of management education at Pratt & Whitney, manufacturing division, in East Hartford, Conn.

Focusing on the rational, as opposed to the intuitive, aspects of management development means looking at problems from several perspectives and using information from all sources to form decisions. Paying attention to selection, on-the-job development, the building block approach to learning and showing managers how to keep "an eye on the ball" are ways we can develop managers.

The recommendations:

1. Success is tied to selection, and one important consideration for managers is that they exhibit an ability to frame the impact of decisions within a broad context. Some managers are selected for their ability to solve problems quickly, but this can create new problems elsewhere.

Selecting with an eye for analytical ability can be achieved through behaviorally based interviews, assessment centers and other traditional methods. For example, when interviewing a management candidate from the shop floor, he should be asked to describe how he'd go about trouble shooting a particular problem, with follow-up questions that highlight the potential impact of that decision in other areas. Is the response haphazard? Systematic? Selecting new managers for their analytical ability sets a groundwork for subsequent development.

2. A manager's boss has responsibility for developing his or her subordinate managers on the job in addition to recommending classroom training. The boss should explain to managers the rationale behind decisions, especially when their input was solicited. Whether or not a subordinate's idea is used, several pieces of information likely were combined to arrive at the final decision.

Part of developing line and middle managers requires that we train higher level managers to share with subordinates how information is used in making decisions. Subordinates then can apply similar logic in their own situations. If I could change one thing about management development, it would be to have the complete involvement and commitment from all levels of management to develop subordinates on the job, not just rely on classroom training.

3. Formal classroom instruction is valuable for developing solid management responses. Most of Pratt & Whitney's classroom training is conducted in-house, by both internal management education staff and consultants, and is based on a building block learning approach. Aimed at first-line and middle managers, the cases, questions, scenarios and other exercises build in complexity throughout the course so that eventually, participants must piece together information and knowledge learned previously to solve the problem successfully. This method gives managers a chance to practice putting information together as well as reinforces earlier learning. Here, as well as with on-the-job development, feedback on the quality of decisions is a must.

4. As important as analytical ability and creative use of information are, a manager must know when to stop and make the decision. People get enamored of a technique, brainstorming for example. If the purpose of a meeting is to address and solve a problem with brainstorming a part of the process, someone has to stop the action and direct the group to begin evaluating and choosing the most useful ideas. Another example is with positive employee relations—from designing programs that validate the individual's self-worth to basic listening skills—learning how to develop good employee relations isn't an end in itself. Rather, it is one path to elevating managers' effectiveness and productivity.

The point is to "keep your eye on the ball," and not lose track of the goal or purpose of rational, or creative, processes.

"The purpose of management development centers on keeping quality and continuity of top management for the future."

Jack McMahon is director, worldwide management development, at Johnson Wax, Racine, Wis.

Serious interest in management development at Johnson Wax began approximately eight years ago. At that time, I coordinated a comprehensive management inventory to assess current positions, identify key positions, assess performance levels, get a handle on individuals' readiness to move into new positions and identify potential backups for the key positions. From this information, we learned that we'd need to do some work on management development to keep certain functions operating smoothly, because ready back-up personnel were not available for every job. Succession planning and planning for contingencies spurred our management development activities, and since then, some practices stand out in their effectiveness for developing managers.

The recommendations:

1. Succession planning is developmental. When we set to work identifying people who are ready, or could be ready within one to three years, to move into key management positions, the skill and career needs of individuals are the first consideration. In what areas does a targeted person need development: Interpersonal communication? People management? It's part of my job to know what outside and internal programs or approaches satisfy our management development needs.

Development is planned and tailored according to which programs fit which managers, and why. Managers' experiences are also broadened on the job when new responsibilities are added, through task force activities, or by enlarging a manager's staff.

2. Provide an environment to increase responsiveness to the company's policies, practices, philosophies and methods of operation, and to develop managerial skills. This is the Johnson Management Institute's (JMI) objective. A company-designed and implemented, 10-day program with a participant waiting list, the JMI helps managers better understand and keep up with the culture and operations of the company. Segments of the Institute program deal with skills assessment, performance appraisal, financial operations, marketing strategies, how the research department works—the full range of operational areas and management processes that affect the manager's role. We cannot tell managers exactly how they should perform their jobs, but we can do our part by making sure they have the basics, and as much information as possible about the company on which to base informed decisions. The attention paid to employee relations and management processes at the JMI has had a direct positive impact on the organization's overall productivity.

3. The structure of work appraisal and planning has an impact on the development of managers. Here, the foundation is management by objectives coupled with the succession planning system. Achievement of objectives and other performance factors are assessed and improvement strategies devised during the appraisal. Additional development needs, gleaned from the annually reviewed succession planning profile, are merged to make up the manager's development agenda. Development plans are suggested from the bottom-up and may be changed or reshaped by top management, depending on how the suggestions mesh with the succession planning picture. Identifying high-potential people through the succession planning system, listening to managers' professional interests, providing feedback and monitoring progress tailors development to the needs of the individual and of the company.

4. The managers' own initiative and commitment is a necessary ingredient for solid development. They receive assistance, but managers participate in defining their own development goals and performance objectives; they have ownership in those priorities and usually do what is needed to equip themselves so the goals can be reached. This may mean asking for counseling, taking initiative with ideas, working at keeping aware of the company's overall business. . .but the participation is there.

Four by Four is compiled and edited by Mary Condon.

Figure 3—Relationship of Number of Employees in the Organization to Median Annual Income

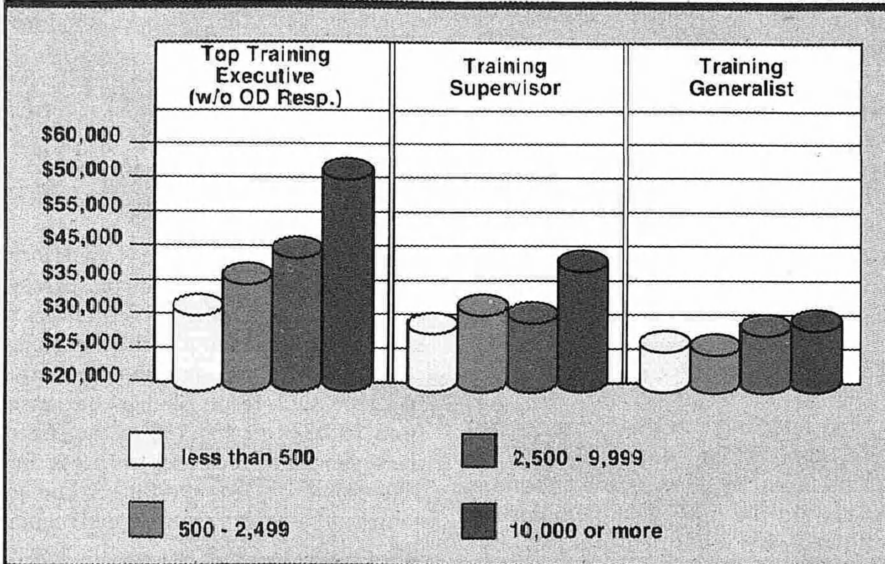


Figure 4—Relationship of Length of Experience to Median Annual Income

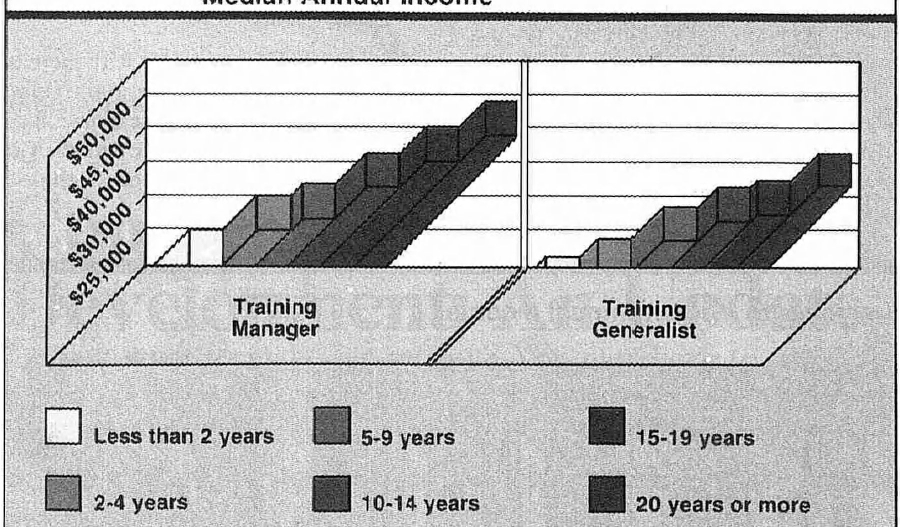
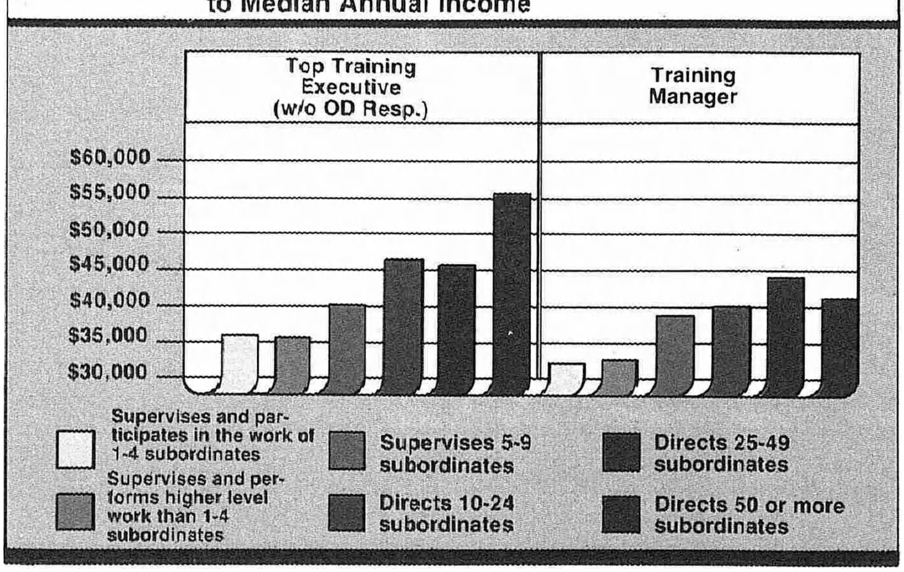


Figure 5—Relationship of Supervisory Responsibility to Median Annual Income



torates have a median income of $43,500. The increase is approximately 34 percent.

Incomes usually are highest for individuals with doctorates, followed closely by those with MBAs. Surprisingly, individuals with a master's degree other than an MBA sometimes earn less than those with only a bachelor's degree. For example, top training and OD executives with a master's degree have a median income of $40,264; those with a bachelor's earn $41,050.

Length of experience

Length of experience correlates strongly with the income of most HRD practitioners. (See Figure 4.) The median income of training managers increases from $25,366 to $44,214 (up approximately 74 percent) as experience increases from less than 2 years to 20 years or more. Training generalists with 10 or more years experience have a median income of $36,450—approximately 62 percent higher than those with less than 2 years experience.

Supervisory responsibility

Income usually is directly related to level of supervisory responsibility. In the case of the top training executive (without OD responsibility), median income rose from $36,950 for those who supervise and participate in the work of 1 to 4 subordinates, to $56,000 for those who direct 50 or more subordinates. This is an increase of 52 percent. A similar change in supervisory responsibility for training managers results in an increase of only 28 percent. Figure 5 illustrates these data.

Geographic responsibility

Significant income differences were reported for jobs that differed in geographic responsibility. The top training executive (without OD responsibility) with international responsibility has a median income of $52,400. This is approximately 28 percent more than his or her counterpart whose responsibility stops at U.S. borders. Internal training and OD consultants earn approximately 18 percent more when they have international responsibilities.

The complete results of this survey and a statistical analysis are published in *Compensation in Training and Development, 3rd Edition*. Copies are available for $110.00 ($85.00 for ASTD National members) from **Abbott, Langer & Associates**, Dept. TD, 548 First Street, Crete, IL 60417.