

SECRETARIAL DEVELOPMENT

A Training Case History

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How the needs for secretarial development were discovered and investigated, the conference program and problem clinics which resulted and the effect of the program upon both secretaries and executives at their work.

Some executives believe that an efficient secretary improves their own effectiveness. In certain cases, she may be the "hidden talent" of an executive. On the other hand, some visualize the secretarial activity as a proper function to an executive but not as *part of his* activity. This invisible wall is bound to have some effect upon the total operation of his office. Of course, it may be that the secretary lacks, in the opinion of the boss, those qualities deemed "desirable" or "necessary" to be a "part of" his activity.

Secretarial Situation

During the last few years such causes as company expansion, marriages, and families had made numerous changes in the secretarial staff members who had gained experience over a period of several years in their respective jobs. Since MONSANTO has an active "promotion from within" policy various girls began to move up the line into secretarial positions. Although they had stenographic ability when hired, in most instances they did not start in a secretarial



HER DEVELOPMENT NEEDS?

position. Gradually therefore a "new" group of girls began to take over the secretarial jobs.

Difficulties

While there were no cases of outright dissatisfaction, there were many comments from various levels regarding the degree to which the girls were performing their job. These comments generally

were directed to the Personnel Director and Plant Manager.

During the summer of 1951 matters began to come to a head. This was enhanced partially by vacations which required the girls to double up on jobs thus giving certain department heads and executives experience with girls other than the one usually assigned to their office. It was at this point that the problem was first brought to the attention of the training department.

Survey of Needs

During the next three or four months meetings were held with practically every individual who had a secretary whether he had complained at one time or not about her performance. (There were a total of twenty-one secretaries.) These interviews were conducted from a prepared jumping-off point of three questions:

1. What secretarial standards do you think are required for your job?
2. In what way do you think your secretary should improve?
3. To what extent have you made these deficiencies known to her and what suggestions have you given to help her improve?

Admittedly these may be embarrassing questions but they were felt necessary to separate the legitimate deficiencies from the imagined or built up deficiencies.

For the most part, it was felt that the "little" things secretaries do could be improved upon. But the "little" things sometimes have a way of producing a

"big" impact in the work situation. It was thought that some of the girls lacked logical reasoning, good judgment, or appreciation of the importance of the work to be done. These are not uncommon complaints about secretaries and indeed, are probably similar to complaints made about many other people in different types of work. In most cases, there was very little complaint about the ability to take dictation or transcribe notes. The girls were high school graduates who had taken courses in shorthand and typing. Two had taken a year of business school afterward and others had gone back to night school at one of the universities in town to "brush up" on their technical ability. *The "intangibles" in being more than just a stenographer was the area to which attention was directed.*

The interviewing which was done may partially answer for the interest displayed by the executives once the results began to come out. This type of approach definitely aided the content of the program and made it quite specific where a more cursory examination of these needs might have led to other conclusions. Although this technique of identifying training needs is quite subjective, the intense investigation made established a sufficiently valid conclusion on which to base a course of instruction.

Planning the Training Course

At the conclusion of these interviews a conference course was constructed that would meet the requirements as brought out by the complaints and suggestions of the department heads and executives.

Throughout the construction of the course various contacts were made with private secretarial schools in the city of St. Louis as well as the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company for communications to round out the development of the scope of the course. Prior to presentation the course content was reviewed by six of the top executives as well as two department heads for their comment and further suggestion. With some small minor revisions it was then presented as outlined below.

Purpose of the Course

The aims of this conference course were:

- A. To identify those qualities believed desirable or necessary to become a good secretary.
- B. To encourage the secretaries to adjust to these desires in a way which *they* felt would be easier or more satisfying.
- C. To determine what the executive did or did not do that prevented the secretary from performing more effectively and to gain the executive's adjustment to the situation.

Conduct of the Sessions

The twenty-one girls were divided into two groups for this program. The instruction period covered seven weeks with each group meeting once each week for an hour and a half. Each meeting was held on a different aspect of being a good secretary until the seven following areas were covered.

Aim A

1. The effect of attitudes on both the work and the people with whom the secretaries work.
2. Secretarial responsibilities.
3. The effect that good office relationships have on the executive, the secretary, and all people within the plant or company with whom they deal.
4. Office communications including the telephone and teletype.
5. Plant and company office practices.

Aim B

6. How to achieve these objectives.

Aim C

7. Problem Clinic—problems submitted anonymously.

The Secretary's Role

The first five subjects, geared to meet the aim A of the course, provided a natural avenue of approach to the entire program. They gave a clearer meaning to the group as to the basic necessity for a secretary and her function as part of an organization.

To be sure, many lengthy discussions arose during these weeks and there were moments when most of the girls were in disagreement as to what was a "desirable" attitude, policy or responsibility. When such a situation arose, the in-

structor quietly faded into the background and permitted a full "free discussion" of the individual viewpoints. To some degree, this acted as a catharsis to the group and soon less emotional and more objective discussion took place.

Motion pictures on secretarial work as well as role-playing of certain situations were introduced alternately into the sessions in order to maintain continuing interest as well as stimulate discussion. For the session concerning communications, Miss Marie Mundy of the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company of St. Louis made visual aids, as well as films, available to the training instructor. In addition, the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company offered to provide additional instruction by members of their staff on the subject of communications.

The Executive's Role

The sixth session was directed at the second objective of the program. If changes were to take place, the atmosphere for these changes had to be produced. Part of this change would necessarily have to come from the executive. But how? What would be required of him? What changes were considered important in providing the right atmosphere?

Since the secretaries were the ones who were being trained to improve their performance, it was decided to ask them what type of office atmosphere they felt was desirable or should be produced by the executive for whom they worked, in order to aid them in their improvement. The items that were most significantly identified (al-



HOW SHOULD THE EXECUTIVE CHANGE?

though there were nine others), with the atmosphere to be produced by the executives, were as follows:

1. The executive should show respect for the job and the secretary.
2. The executive should willingly admit a mistake when he makes one and take the blame.
3. His orders and instructions should be specific and job assignments clearly outlined.
4. The executive should place his trust in his secretary.
5. He should not correct his secretary in such a way that it can be seen or heard by other people.

These items arrested the attention of the Plant Manager. After discussion and consideration with various superintendents of the plant, it was decided that a report on these factors should be prepared by the Training Department and be sent to each person in a supervisory capacity who had a secretary. This was done before the course of instruction was completed so that the secretaries might find immediate opportunity, even during the program, to begin to change toward those objectives that were considered desirable or necessary.

Problem Clinic

The last session was directed at the third objective of the program. To set a goal or objective to be reached is easier said than done. It was anticipated that problems were present or would arise that would thwart some of the

attempts to improve. For this reason, the final session was developed as a "Problem Solving Clinic."

This idea permitted each secretary to submit anonymously for discussion one or more of the irritating or perplexing problems of her job. These problems were typed out and dropped in a locked box within a week of the session. At the meeting, the box was opened and one problem at a time was written on the blackboard. This problem was then discussed with certain suggestions or recommendations as to what a secretary might do when confronted with such a problem. This was probably the most fruitful of any of the discussion periods. Listed below are some of the problems which would probably have general application in most offices.

Problem: How can you tactfully tell your boss that his cigar or pipe smoke is annoying while you are taking dictation?

Recommended Solutions: Make several very obvious coughs. Wave your hand back and forth in front of your face until he sees it. Tactfully state that the smoke annoys you. Open the window before you start dictation.

Problem: How can you make your boss stop wasting your time while he dictates at a snail's pace? In some cases, he has it written out on paper and just reads it to you.

Recommended Solutions: Suggest that it is easier for you to take dictation at a faster pace. If it is written out in longhand, suggest that you might copy it and save *his* time.



CONFERENCE ON SECRETARY-EXECUTIVE PROBLEMS

Problem: What can you do when your boss leaves the office without telling you where he is going and numerous people keep calling for him?

Recommended Solutions: Inform the caller that he is out and take the number of the caller. Do this for each call and then suggest to the executive that you could have transferred these calls if he had informed you where he was. Inform the caller that the executive is busy momentarily but that he will call back at the first opportunity.

Problem: One of the executives is talking on the phone. Another telephone call comes in for him on a different extension. It is the superior of the executive. This superior wants the executive to call him at once as soon

as he is finished. Instead the executive immediately leaves the office after having been informed by the secretary that he should call his superior. Several moments later the superior calls back asking for the executive. What should the secretary say?

Recommended Solutions: Inform the superior that the executive had to leave the office as a result of his first telephone call. Inform him that the executive is taking care of an extremely important matter and that he will call back as quickly as possible.

These and *forty-one* other problems were discussed by the two groups of secretaries. Events taking place since this program ended have demonstrated that most of the problems occurring after

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the "Problem Clinic" were dealt with in one or more of the ways pointed out during the "Clinic." By this means, the group collectively solved those problems that had not been settled individually before.

Once again, a report was made of this session and at the direction of the Plant Manager, it was distributed to every person in a supervisory capacity who had a secretary.

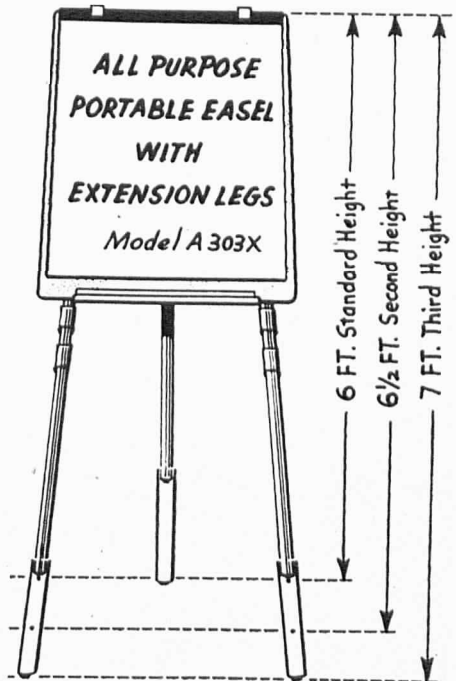
Results

No great claims of accomplishment will be made here but the manner in which secretaries have gone about their duties since the program is encouraging.

In summary, it can be stated that each of the secretaries who attended the sessions went back to the job with a broader understanding of her function, more knowledge of how she might deal with her problems from a practical though tactful standpoint, and a better idea of how she might help to improve her team: The Executive and the Secretary. It is believed that to accomplish just these few results, even moderately, made the whole program worth-while.

On the other hand, the executives learned of situations that were never brought to them directly but which had a direct effect upon the operations of their own office. Their willingness to understand these situations and the unknown part they played in them, gave them real insight into how an executive can aid his secretary in becoming an effective part of his office activity.

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