

A Comment On George Odiorne's Paper

CHRIS ARGYRIS

I appreciate an opportunity to comment on Odiorne's revised paper. I would be less than honest if I did not say that, in some sense, I am sorry that he did not choose to print what he chose to say at the debate. His original paper provided the best case that I had for my allegations that he distorted the facts. (Perhaps he agreed with me.)

In my opinion, the revised edition still suffers from the faults that were in the original paper. Thus, I will not comment on all the points since that would lead to a very repetitive presentation.

There are three points, however, that deserve some comment.

Odiorne writes that the most damaging criticisms of the adherents of the laboratory approach is that we have rejected orderly, rational, conscious criticism. What are the facts?

1. NTL has had a long history of inviting scholars, who are not intending to be T-group leaders, to Bethel (at its expense) to conduct research. Some of the reports are, by no means, favorable. One, now famous and scholarly report was published by William F. Whyte about ten years ago.¹

2. Since 1948 NTL has published reports about the training processes which have received wide circulation and have been the impetus for criticism and change.

3. The studies cited by Odiorne as being critical of the effectiveness of T-groups were conducted by Bass and Miles who are both competent T-group trainers and members of the NTL network.

4. M. Schroder wrote a report after attending a Bethel program in which she raised serious questions about laboratory education. For example, do we mean to imply that: all authority is bad? Group effectiveness is equivalent to member satisfaction. The trainer should not help the group, etc. Also she made an insightful analysis of the possible unconscious needs being fulfilled by those in laboratory education.² This paper was received with deepest appreciation among the people in laboratory education, witnessed by its wide circulation.

5. Tannenbaum, Weschler, and Maszarick asked Professor Robert Dubin to comment on any part of their new book. He chose the opportunity to write an attack on sensitivity training that was printed in the book without any alteration.³ (In my humble opinion, my opponent could have profited by reading it.)

6. Weschler and Reisel have written a detailed report on T-groups which includes some important questions about their limitations.⁴

Odiorne writes that there has not been any evidence of change in "back home"

behavior as a result of the training. This is not true. There have been studies which illustrate behavioral changes. (However, as I point out in the next section, none of us is satisfied with the present state of research.)

1. Miles,⁵ Buchanan,⁶ Boyd,⁷ and Shutz⁸ have conducted research where they have asked others (than the subjects) to report on behavioral change. The positive as well as the negative results were reported. (In the first, third, and fourth studies appropriate controls groups were used.)⁹

2. In the study that I conducted (and Odiorne quotes), I cited evidence for behavioral change. This is the only way the interpersonal competence scores were arrived at. By the way, the data cited by Odiorne in my study came from Dr. Roger Harrison who conducted an independent evaluation.

3. Dr. Bunker has just completed an extremely large and thorough study of the effectiveness of laboratory education. It is true that it has not, as yet, appeared in print. However, is it too much to ask someone who is ready to ban laboratory education to get into contact with those conducting the research to learn what is going on?¹⁰

4. Finally, my opponent's logic (or lack of it) is well illustrated by the first few pages of his paper. Let us assume that all the research just cited above had never existed, and that only anecdotal evidence existed to lend support to the effectiveness of laboratory education. This type of evidence Odiorne decries (and rightly so).

However, he then makes a remarkable switch. After condemning a defense based on anecdotal evidence he bases his attack largely on anecdotal evidence. Do two wrongs make a right?

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9. Two sources of research in laboratory education, M. B. Miles. "Human Relations Training: Current Status," in E. H. Schein and I. R. Weschler (eds) "Issues in Human Relations Training," National Training Laboratories, pp. 3-13 and D. Stock, "A Summary of Research on Training Groups," New York, John Wiley & Sons (In Press).
10. Dr. Bunker was director of the research for the National Training Laboratories and is now at the Harvard Business School.

Discussion

Following the presentations by Dr. Argyris and Dr. Odiorne, several questions were raised by members of the audience. Those of more than general interest have been edited and follow:

DR. JERRY ROSENBERG (Assistant Professor, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University): Dr. Argyris, you said that you do not wish to have anybody harmed by these sensitivity programs and your comment was that not everybody should attend such programs.

Is there any justification in the advertising of these programs primarily through brochures when they are labeled "Executive Leadership Programs" and "Management Development Programs" only to find when the person gets there, that it is something quite different from what had been anticipated. And had he known in advance that it was going to be a sensitivity program, would he have attended?

DR. ARGYRIS: First of all, I agree with you, there is that problem, but let me ask you something. Does this not happen to you every day with students who complain, "I never thought Yale or Cornell was going to be like this"? This is inherent in the very nature of the problem.

However, I do not suggest that this should absolve us from trying to write more effective announcements. I think that we can specify the end results of laboratory education as well as, or as poorly as, Yale University specifies its

end results. When we hand our youngster (at Yale) a blue book, we give him no guarantee that he will learn anything by coming to Yale. So far as I can tell, we have tried to communicate as best we can what goes on during a laboratory.

Maybe this is one of the beautiful things about life. Maybe it is a good thing that education cannot be defined completely. As I understand the research, one of the best definitions I know of freedom is the opportunity to make a decision and to take risks. Where did this idea come from? It came from the Jewish psychiatrists who were in Dachau and other prison camps. Ironically enough, some of the greatest understandings about the nature of freedom have come from the people who almost lost their freedom. They used a difficult situation as a challenge for growth. Perhaps the individual coming to a laboratory program can do the same.

MR. WILLIAM E. BYRON (Personnel Administrator, State of New York, Public Service Commission): I attended a laboratory at Bethel, Maine. My comment would be that in relation to lots of other training experiences in school, in college, in organizational work, in many kinds of institutes, it is my feeling that this was one of the most real pieces of learning experience that I had the opportunity to attend.

DR. ARGYRIS: There must be someone who did not have a good experience. Let us have a balance.

DR. ERWIN TAYLOR (President, Personnel Research & Development Corp.): I shared George's harrowing experience in Bethel in 1955 and came away pretty much with some of the thoughts that he has expressed today.

I think that for me—I don't know whether I can speak for George on this—but I saw my experience as a function of that particular lab, of the group that engaged in it, the group that took it. Incidentally, he is right about the young lady who went berserk and spent the next two weeks on the grass with a psychiatrist, not day and night—Chris is also right in that she had been in therapy and should not have been admitted to the lab, unfortunately. She happened to have been in my therapy group (T-group, that is). In the years that have elapsed, partially from monetary motivation, partially from mellowing with age, I have begun to wonder if there isn't something in this type of training, and in recognition, as I am sure Chris recognizes, there are a lot of unanswered questions.

I was somewhere in the middle between George on the one hand, and Chris on the other. It is not all black and white, and it does not take for everyone. Yet I can't gainsay the even anecdotal and testimonial evidence of those who have attended and their spontaneous reports of what they have gotten out of it. I have talked to a few. "It is a barrage of nonsense," one fellow, particularly, said, "They spent so much time on what they were going to talk about, they never got to talking about it." This happens. That is one reaction from a 1955 participant.

MR. NATHAN GLASSMAN (Man-

ager Training Staff, Linde Division, Union Carbide): I have a question of Dr. Argyris.

One of your last comments was that you can easily see the nature of a man's behavior when he comes back to a rigidly structured organization and is not particularly truthful, that this is a natural development of his understanding of the dangers of being so in an organization.

Then how can you possibly just have a T-group program within such an organization itself where you are forcing the man to strip his defenses in the very situation where he can be most harmed by it?

I have been struck in times past in the justification provided for this saying, "Oh, well, the terminal interview takes care of this."

Nonsense! You know this and I know it.

DR. ARGYRIS: I firmly agree with you that no terminal interview takes care of this.

First of all, I can only speak about the programs that I am mostly acquainted with, the ones I participated in. None of these programs has ever been started by our demanding that they be started. The people decided that a laboratory was something they wanted. I think every human being has the right to make such a choice.

Two, in my own experience, when you create these kinds of lab situations, you do not force people. At least, I have never been in a situation where a staff member says to you, "I force you to take down your defenses."

It is true that group members may say this to each other. Hopefully they

learn, that this behavior will not work. You can't either coerce a man to become defensive or less defensive. I, personally, would never agree to a laboratory program with external coercion.

This is precisely why I believe we should not start unless there can be a competent diagnosis to see if the organization can "take" it, *and* unless we can start at the top. The dilemma then becomes, how to get the vice-presidents to be against the program even if the president is for it. In one case we spent eight different sessions before we had some feeling they were all for it and not agreeing simply because the president desired it.

DR. ODIORNE: As you know, Bob Blake and Chris have probably been the

leading figures in running single company groups, at least they are identified in this direction, although other NTL people have also.

I suspect that if you take a responsible person who has been in the field as long as Blake and Argyris have to train business people who are going to stay together in a team, you effect better change than taking people whose only contact in a lab is with other people from other large companies who are recently introduced to one another. Very shortly they go back to the job and they never see each other again but they seldom carry this training from the group back to the job.

If you take a working team, put them under a responsible individual as trainer

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and say, "Let's talk about first how this team functions, how it makes decisions," and then go into what are some of the actions that individuals take that will have a bad effect on group functioning, and discuss this, you come out with a useful form of training. The group functions better, it makes better decisions, and it makes changes faster. The key distinction rests between therapy sessions and action training in group dynamics. The difference in the objective lies in the moral stature of the person who is leading it.

This is what I question: if the core group is permitting an unethical group of people to run around the fringes and don't take vigorous and aggressive action to eliminate them, who is?

DR. ARGYRIS: One other comment on your question. Recently we have been able to observe decision-making meetings as long as they were deciding crucial problems. These meetings were analyzed by a new system that we had developed. If the "competence" score went above a certain point, then we would believe that a laboratory program can be of help. If the competence scores were low, then we would *not* recommend a laboratory program even though the members might desire it.

MR. M. WARNER (Director, Contract Food Service Division, Brass Rail Food Services): I would like to ask each of you to recommend possibly a periodical, a book or a specific magazine article that those of us here today may take away with us as a reference, or may go out and find as a reference to use in further evaluation.

DR. ODIORNE: I think perhaps for a touch of realism of what happens

if you want to learn vicariously, is S. Wechsler's book, from UCLA, "Inside a Sensitivity Training Group." I think this is what I would recommend to you in order to assist you actually to visualize what is happening.

The second is a series of articles that have been published in the *Training Directors Journal* by Blake and Mouton, which are admittedly aimed at selling sensitivity training for one-form groups. I would also look at the Fortune article to learn what are some of the conflicting viewpoints. I suspect that the question the man from the Cornell staff asked from the floor is a fairly legitimate one.

Let us not ask anyone to walk into something where he isn't reasonably aware of what is apt to happen to him and that he, in effect, begins to see both sides. If we ask a person to take a risk, we also ought to be able to point out the possible gains and losses to him.

DR. ARGYRIS: One of the troubles with depending upon reading materials may be illustrated by a case. I gave a group of executives three articles about laboratory education. (By the way, the range of IQ of these people was 130 to 172.) Then I gave them a half-hour lecture on laboratory education. Then they attended such a program, and I still heard some say, "I never thought it was going to be like this."

I don't want to play down the reading ahead of time. I think it is absolutely important. I think laboratory education has grossly underemphasized the importance of learning cognitively, intellectually. However, I would suggest that one of the single best criteria

has to do with your own feelings, your own feelings of whether you are competent enough, whether you can take some of these risks. If you're not very comfortable with it, I would stay out. In fact, I would worry if you did read, felt good about what you have read and attended primarily on the reader experience.

Secondly, there is a book coming out to be published by John Wiley & Sons. It is written by Bradford, Benne, and Gibb. This will contain a complete collection of various points of view.

Finally, if I may put in a bit of a plug, for those who are interested in what goes on in a T-group composed of people who are in business and who are working with each other, I recently published a book called "Interpersonal Competence and Organizational Effectiveness" (Irwin-Dorsey Press). In it you will find actual tape transcriptions of a T-group.

One more comment on the realist vs. the unrealist. If you don't mind, I have to keep nailing this. I think there is nothing unrealistic about facing interpersonal relationships. They are there. They are just as realistic as anything else, and George made a kind note to me and said, "And the scientist is very realistic." I think so.

DR. ODIORNE: I would like to comment about "scientists" if I may. I think that, "the scientist is a realist" as we can see from the explosions of atomic bombs. Yet, we occasionally find people in behavioral sciences such as a sociologist discovering something new or a psychologist discovers something new about management.

Frequently he takes a position as if DuPont having discovered nylon, declared a proprietary interest in coal, air and water at the same time.

A new discovery in psychology may or may not be a total change in management theory. There is a body of knowledge called management. There are the functions that a manager performs and then there are sub-sets of disciplines that impinge on them.

March has said that man is a political leader. He is at times. There are other times in which he is the passive watcher, and others when he is the democrat, and others when he is perhaps the overriding ruler. At Minneapolis-Honeywell I have heard it said, a manager is really the thermostat. He turns the heat on and off for the organization. Managers should keep behavioral science in perspective.

Noted . . .

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