SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

ON AN EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENT FOR TRAINING

Guest Commentary
BY ISABEL L. WENER

Incident 1: An instructor listens to a trainee make a statement. The instructor grins, turns his thumb down and victoriously sings out *"Wrong!"* — as he looks around the rest of the group for approval of his humor.

Incident 2: An instructor listens to a trainee's response to a question. As soon as the trainee is finished speaking, the instructor turns to another member of the group and asks another question.

Incident 3: An instructor absolutely insists that a trainee, so nervous she can barely speak, must make her presentation *now* — even though the trainee has asked to be the last to present.

How often do such incidents occur? Depending on the quality of the training staff, such techniques may be part of the regular stock-in-trade of the instructors. When trainers are basically salespeople, mechanics, engineers *et al* who have been given training responsibilities with little or no concern for their potential for success in this role, anything can happen in the training setting! Even professional trainers demonstrate a wide variety of behavior which effectively cripple their own endeavors because of the resulting emotional climate.

Admittedly, none of the three incidents cited above appears earth-shattering on the surface, but let's look at the implications they hold for trainees in attendance.

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In Incident 1, the instructor is sending a message to the trainee that his ignorance/stupidity is a great source of amusement for the entire group. The conclusion to be drawn by the other group members: Anyone who opens his or her mouth (participates) in this training environment is setting him or herself up for possible ridicule or embarrassment. This kind of training situation is fraught with danger and smart trainees pull back and keep quiet. In this manner, the instructor is able to silence the group, do all the talking and unterruptedly continue on the ego trip he has been taking all along.

In Incident 2, the instructor opened the door to the training situation, invited the trainee in and then left him standing in the foyer, hat in hand, not knowing whether his response is right or wrong, acceptable or not. He does not even know for sure that the instructor heard him. Maybe what he said is not even worth acknowledging. All he does know is that he feels rejected and resentful. This behavior is rarely noticed by the other trainees. They will continue to participate until the instructor turns them off, one by one. Although this technique requires finesse and additional time, it is also totally effective in eliminating trainee participation.

In Incident 3, we see a total negation of the rights of the trainee as an individual. This kind of thinking has its roots in the public-education system where, like it or not, when it is your "turn," you "go." The trainees are being told that they are unimportant parts of a larger system and that the continued forward motion of the system is the prime concern, not the welfare of its minor parts. With this kind of approach, the instructor can totally depersonalize the training interaction and keep himself safe from contact on a human-to-human basis. He also converts the training milieu into a "lock-step" situation in which everyone does as he or she is told — no questions asked!

None of the actions mentioned

here are "terrible" in and of themselves; but rarely does such behavior occur in isolation. As we have seen, each is a contributory factor in establishing a specific kind of trainer-trainee relationship. As such, each is usually accompanied by other "distancing" phenomena which are expressions of the emotional environment in which the trainer feels most comfortable.

Emotional Blocks to Learning

In order to see why such behaviors are detrimental to the training situation, we must remember that the greatest blocks to learning are emotionally based. People do *not* like to feel foolish, fail, be laughed at, expose their vulnerability or have their individuality negated. They must come through their experiences with their self-respect and their self-images intact. If they cannot, then they will deny the experience.

Yes, we learned all that in Psych 101 — but how many of us live it, day in and day out? It is difficult to keep the emotional welfare of trainees in mind in today's highly results-oriented business setting. Worse yet, some trainers even find it difficult to acknowledge that trainees have an emotional side that insists on cropping up in the classroom.

There is one word that can be used to sum up what trainees need in the emotional environment that enables and even encourages them to learn. That word is *security.* Security means that they will *not* be hurt or humiliated, laughed at or ignored, insulted or rejected. Security means that they will be given supportive encouragement, constructive criticism and acceptance by both the trainer and their peers. Security means that the trainee is always among friends, always among people who genuinely care about him or her and want to help him or her grow.

As in all aspects of training, the instructor plays the key role in setting the tone of the group. If the trainer is not accepting, caring and supportive, how can we expect such behavior from the trainees? (Although I have, on occasion, seen a group of trainees become intensely protective of each other

when confronted with a particularly vituperative and callous instructor.)

How does one go about providing sufficient security for trainees so that they are not afraid to try new skills and/or behaviors? How can we ensure the existence of that necessary high-trust level?

Unfortunately, this extremely important element in the training scheme cannot be *designed* into a program. Yet, without it, the best-designed program in the world can fall apart. Security cannot be established through audio-visual aids, brainstorming sessions, sophisticated games or any other known training devices. The source of the proper emotional environment for training lies *within* the trainer.

We have all seen excellent trainers work with inferior programs, poor aids, unmotivated trainees and turn the whole situation into an electrifying experience. Sad to say, many of us have also seen the exact opposite happen. It is almost impossible to overemphasize the importance of the effects of the trainer's personality, both good and bad.

The Answer:
Selecting the Trainer

Train-the-trainer programs are, of course, worthwhile. They provide people with the necessary tools to do the job they were selected to do. The answer to the question of providing the proper emotional environment lies, however, not in training the trainer, but in the step before that — *selecting* the trainer.

The above statement is made despite extensive involvement with and exposure to a wide variety of programs designed to produce effective trainers. These programs are all oriented to the external aspects which contribute to developing others and, while these aspects are necessary, they are not all-encompassing. (There are some "dynamite" trainers who don't really understand the effective use of the chartpad.)
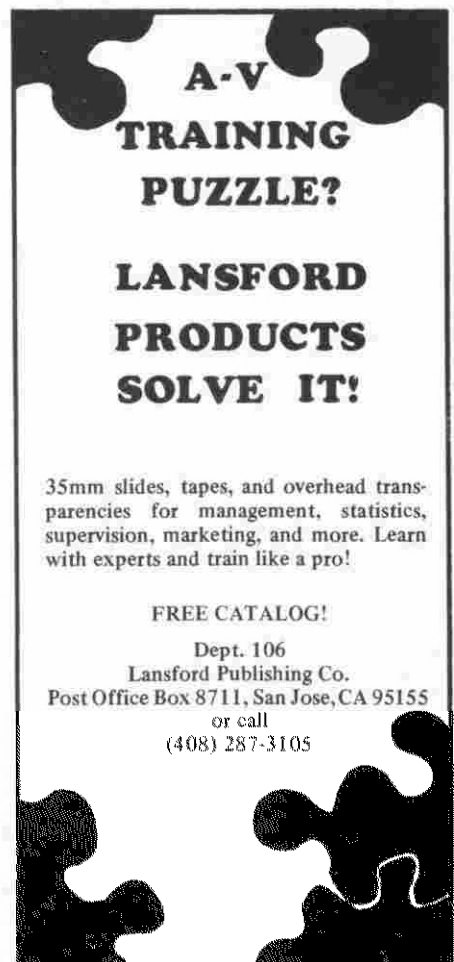
What is the ingredient that makes a trainer successful — despite poor programs, inadequate aids and even a lack of formal

skills? As corny as it may sound, the secret is probably a genuine love of other people.

It is this love that is expressed as a concern for the growth and development of others without the infliction of pain. It is also expressed in after-hours counseling, in the constantly positive and encouraging attitude that permeates the training sessions; in the fact that no trainee ever feels like a "stepchild" or a total failure or is ever written off as a complete loss by the instructor.

There are dozens of behaviors that trainers can manifest that reflect their feelings about and attitudes toward other people. When these feelings and attitudes are strongly positive and are given free play, trainees cannot be stopped from learning.

To date, I have neither seen nor heard of a method (short of extended psychotherapy) which effectively teaches trainers (or anybody else, for that matter) to love others. We may improve their

speech patterns, lecture skills and use of audio-visual aids. We may even effect behavioral changes in these skills areas. No one, however, is presently marketing a system for remaking a total personality — and I fear the day they do!

Recognizing that people cannot be remodeled to fit the ideal training personality, we are forced to rely totally on the selection process. Like it or not, we must admit that having people read books on human behavior or go through sensitivity training will not produce rapid meaningful changes in their behavior. If we want caring supportive trainers, we must hire them. Skills can be taught later.

Trainers generally fall into two categories: professional trainers and "experts" who are given training responsibilities. There are pitfalls in the selection processes of both of these groups.

Professional trainers bring with them a broad and, hopefully, solid base of knowledge of why people

learn, how people learn best, what techniques/devices are available and how to use them effectively and efficiently. What, then, can be the problem in hiring an experienced professional?

What is the basic personality? Many people assume that all schoolteachers love children. Remember back to your childhood or recall a teacher you may presently know. That assumption is not 100 per cent correct. Neither would an assumption that all trainers are crazy about other people and want to devote their lives to the development of others be totally correct. Training offers other satisfactions — many far more selfish than that.

Key factors to be uncovered in the selection process (hopefully through behavioral interviewing techniques) should include:

• *Why is that person a trainer?* Do they really care about helping others? Is their satisfaction that of being the "star"? Do they have the "expert" complex?

• *What has previous experience done to them?* Are they disillusioned about people's desire to learn and their ability to be motivated? Do they have a "packaged" approach to training or are they willing to look at a new situation with an open mind?

• *How do they measure their success?* Is their concern over the number of trainees they can "process" as quickly as possible? Do they see their success in terms of both their achievements and the achievements of those they have trained? Will they consider themselves truly successful when they have moved *out* of the training function?

• *How do they handle frustration?* Do they have sufficient patience and persistence and creativity to ensure that their efforts with others will be almost limitless? How do they feel about people who don't "pick things up" quickly?

The list goes on and on. There are at least a dozen more characteristics which could and should be explored before a hiring decision can be made — if one wishes to hire a training professional who is

more likely to succeed than to fail.

Many companies fall prey to the theory that, if a person is a good mechanic (salesperson, manager, whatever), he or she automatically will be good at training others to fill the same position. Sometimes this is true. Most of the time, however, it is not. The problem inherent in this type of situation is that such people try to make their trainees into carbon copies of themselves. *"This worked for me so it must be the right way"* is their motto.

The key to failure in this sense is that the best salesperson in the company may not even understand what it is that he or she does so successfully and, therefore, cannot impart that knowledge or those skills to anyone else. Also, he or she may be totally attuned to his or her own personal success and cannot make the transition to seeing personal success in terms of the success of others. The line supervisor who held the company record for speed, may have no patience with slower learners and may even sacrifice quality for quantity.

The only way to avoid these and similar problems is to seek out the "expert" who also has the qualities of the effective trainer, and then give him or her the necessary skills.

Some companies have opted, wherever possible, for self-taught packages which either eliminate the role of the trainer or else minimize its importance. In a lot of training situations this is a totally acceptable and effective way to train. The question remains, however, when a trainer is needed, how sure are we that the person filling those shoes will not be doing more harm than good? How sure are you? — *Isabel L. Wener*

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