

In Practice

“Thank You for Using AT&(click). . .”

People who frequently dial information or request long-distance assistance marvel at operators' digital dexterity. Jabbing with bug-squashing speed whatever console button it takes to dispatch your call, these telephonic tyrants zap you on your way and jump quickly to route the next misguided message.

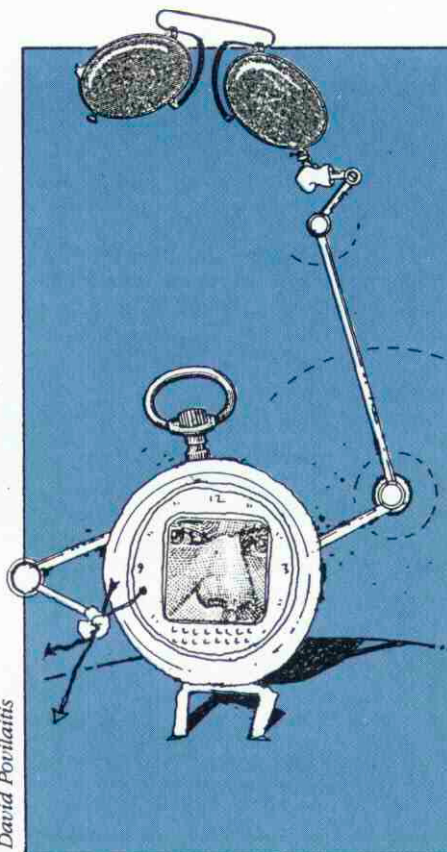
The overwhelming impression left is one of offputting efficiency. Although callers generally get the service they seek—the call does in fact go through—it's easy to bemoan the lack of civility and, indeed, customer service.

The problem is computerized monitoring. Operators earn raises and keep jobs based on the volume of calls they handle. With electronic supervisors measuring productivity by the second, sometimes listening in to count excess syllables, these workers are under the gun eight hours a day. Other workers who perform repetitive tasks, some six million by one estimate, labor under similarly unforgiving conditions.

And, according to a couple of recent reports, such computerized monitoring produces effects more ill than good. The Spring 1988 edition of the *Sloan Management Review* reported on efforts to monitor claims processors' computer work at a Canadian insurance company, and concluded that the Big Brother system has serious drawbacks.

First off, customer service suffered. Employees polled believed that management valued quantity over quality and that meeting production quotas was the most important determinant of job proficiency.

Teamwork also declined under the monitoring system's watchful gaze. Claims processors who catch up on their work are expected to take the most complex cases from others who remain stacked up. But management's emphasis on quotas made most processors hesitant to do so. The tough situations—those requiring time-consuming customer



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service inquiries—stayed mired under piles of easy cases.

Other effects were just as bad. Payroll costs remained unexpectedly high. Where managers had thought that automated monitoring would reduce the need for live supervision, they found instead that workers needed considerable feedback from bosses to remain motivated.

And most damningly, computerized monitoring seemed to hinder the very factor it was supposed to improve: productivity.

The Office of Technology Assessment recently weighed in with an equally gloomy worst-case scenario, but hinted that properly designed computerized monitoring systems can improve efficiency without reducing workers to drones.

In OTA's *The Electronic Supervisor* the congressionally sponsored organization paints a dark picture in which word processors and data-entry workers are evaluated by the number of keys stroked, where operators and telemarketers are rated

on time spent per customer, and where bank proof clerks rush to feed checks through a sorting machine equipped with a counter.

Emphasizing that it has yet to identify an Orwellian equivalent to the Dickensian sweatshop, OTA nonetheless warns that computerized monitoring can sap initiative and job satisfaction, induce stress-related health problems, and make employees more apt to seek the protection of organized labor.

The report also predicts increasing use of the monitoring schemes and suggests that some high-level technical and managerial jobs may soon come under electronic scrutiny. It notes that commodities brokers, computer programmers, and bank loan officers all do work that is easily quantifiable.

But OTA also observed some good coming out of the computerized-monitoring trend. Trainers, for instance, can apply collected data to task analyses and use the information to improve worker skills.

In general, OTA found, employees welcome this type of input. Feedback helps them gauge their own performance and better serve their customers. Properly utilized, computer monitoring can act as a motivator and as a training tool.

Third from the Top and Rising

On the Top-10 Charts of Modern Business, a mindless catchphrase is worth a thousand words.

“Quality,” a relatively recent entry in the corporate hit parade, is rising fast as a bullet these days and may soon surpass the perennial #1 cliché “People Are Our Most Valuable Resource.”

But given America's well-publicized shift to a service economy, adage-industry insiders are keeping a sharp eye on a remake of a golden oldie: “Service Is What We Sell.” Digitally enhanced for the 1990s, the platitude pundits have remixed this hoary fave, and experts feel it has an

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honest chance to reach the top. No bubble gum here either; this number has substance as well as style.

Renamed "Customer Service," it's catchy, easy to dance to, and, best of all, any company can learn it. The key to appreciating the new tune, it seems, is repeated listening.

Learning International, a Connecticut-based training multinational, recently studied American and Canadian customer-service training programs, and a major conclusion emerged: One-shot workshops won't suffice. For the best in customer service, companies must focus on ongoing follow-up training. As a corollary, programs should feature brief modules that allow flexible scheduling and practice between formal sessions.

Other trends exposed by the Learning International survey of 94 customer-service managers and trainers:

- Companies whose technical employees interact frequently with clients—office equipment vendors, for example—are most likely to offer formal customer-service training.
- Canadian businesses purport more awareness of the need to serve customers well than do their American counterparts.
- Survey participants from both sides of the border believe training helps companies keep customers. They also feel training gives excellent firms a value-added edge that distinguishes them from the competition.

Expired Contracts

One reads a lot lately about employees' lack of company loyalty. With downsizing, restructuring, and other popular cut-'em-loose business strategies in ascendance, you don't need to be a rocket scientist to figure out that the nature of the employment contract—for employers and employees—has changed.

The scope of that change and

what it means for human resource practitioners was the topic of a seminar series held in New York and San Francisco earlier this year.

Addressing top HR executives from America's biggest corporations, Harvard professor and recent ASTD National Conference speaker D. Quinn Mills suggested that training and development can play a significant role in enhancing employee commitment and morale, despite the inevitable market conditions and competitive pressures that sometimes scuttle the best corporate employment intentions.

"A new employment contract is emerging," Mills said, "with no long-term commitment on the part of the employee or the employer. American companies can no longer offer job security nor can they expect the same type of loyalty from their employees."

What can HR do to maintain loyalty in the face of Draconian staff cuts? Much of the prescription smacks of lowering expectations, but Mills advocates a wide-ranging approach.

First, senior executives need to appreciate the importance of a "core of stable, motivated, and loyal employees," even when worker rolls have to be trimmed. If downsizing becomes essential, at least a small cadre of veterans can carry on the company's traditional culture. Trainers and developers can help executives develop leadership skills that foster this view.

In addition, execs need to learn to consider employee perspectives and values. "Today, it is important for companies to include the attitudes and beliefs of its people if it expects to successfully implement a strong business strategy," Mills stated. "A clear vision of this strategy must be outlined, and employees must be given a voice." HRD, he implied, can encourage such strategic thinking and the open lines of communications it requires.

Finally, trainers and developers can promote loyalty—or at least make corporate pragmatism easier to

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bear—by helping coworkers and clients embrace change. Noted William F. Pilder, chairman of the career development firm Mainstream Access Inc., "Individuals and corporations must become more flexible. Change can be seen as an opportunity for challenge and growth.

"Real employment security," Pilder said, "is found in the willingness and ability. . . to be adaptable and to accept more risk." Innovative career development plans can allow workers at all levels to look beyond a single company's necessarily limited career opportunities.

The Multicultural Workforce—New Challenges for Trainers

Submitted by Jan Abbott, president of the Ross Consulting Group in Fremont, California.

Management trainers have seen major changes in the kinds of people attending their classes lately. Fifteen years ago, most trainees were American-born and -educated men, with common values about life and work and common assumptions about behavior in training situations.

Today, changing immigration and demographic patterns have brought more Asians and Hispanics into the workforce, and women are now more significant players than ever before. According to the Department of Labor, white males make up only 46 percent of the workforce, and that figure will drop to 25 percent over the next 12 years.

Welcome to the multicultural workforce! A place where trainers now work with people whose values and expectations defy the mainstream, whose native language may not be English, and for whom American-style training may be neither comfortable nor productive. A place where we trainers must adapt our styles and programs in order to properly serve our clients. People from different cultures may view very negatively some of the

techniques we take for granted. And training loses its effectiveness when that happens.

Consider the culture gaps that can occur in the course of a traditional American training program:

■ You begin by stressing that the session agenda is flexible, with time for discussion and questions. *Multicultural participants may wonder, "Why is the agenda flexible? Is this program just a pilot. . . not a proven program?"*

■ You distribute a binder of materials a week before the session starts. You note that not everything in the binder will be covered in the class and that additional handouts will be passed out during class. *But some learners may believe that "incomplete" materials signal an unprepared instructor. You may confirm this impression when you give out more material during the class.*

■ You kick off the class with a personal introductions exercise—something lighthearted to get people

relaxed and familiar with each other. *Your participants may think, "I don't feel comfortable about people asking me personal questions. Or about you asking me to ask them."*

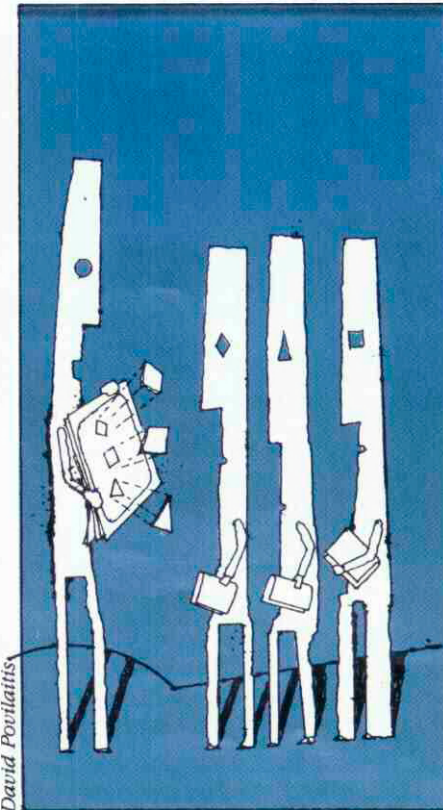
■ You review the session's objectives, perhaps asking people if they would like to add some new ones. *Multicultural audiences may believe you are not earning your pay: "You should tell us what the objectives are—you're the trainer."*

■ Finally, you start the training. You use a variety of techniques: lectur-ettes, group discussions, brainstorming, role plays. You use an open, friendly style and you show you are willing to take criticism and argument. *The objections here are many: "I don't understand why we are supposed to be learning from each other. . . isn't it the instructor's job to teach?" "It's embarrassing when you pick me out and ask me a question—I don't know what answer you want." "We don't like brainstorming and role plays. They aren't serious. It sounds like playing games."*

Obviously, American instructional style doesn't always work with learners from other cultures. Cultural differences in thinking patterns, teaching methods, and classroom practices need to be accommodated.

Thinking patterns vary from culture to culture. Some groups—particularly North Americans and Northern Europeans—feel most comfortable using inductive logic. They like their instruction to move from the particular to the general. But most of the rest of the world prefers deductive logic—moving from the general to the particular.

Teaching methods don't apply universally either. American managers get information from a variety of sources, so American trainers feel comfortable using several media and instructional techniques during the course of a single seminar. People from other cultures, however, often rely solely on oral transmission of knowledge. They expect to learn from lectures and other one-way



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methods of communication in which they're told what they need to do or know.

Inappropriate interaction in the classroom can interfere with effective training as well. In cultures prizing individualism and egalitarianism, learners feel free to debate, contradict, and criticize the instructor and one another. In other cultures, teachers remain distant from students, one-way sources of learning never to be publicly contradicted. Students speak only when called upon and maintain formal, harmonious relations at all times.

As the U.S. workforce changes to include more and more people from diverse cultural backgrounds, practical professionalism will require trainers to update their skills and learn how to design and deliver programs that serve multicultural audiences. These tips provide a sound start:

■ Educate yourself generally about some of the major cultural differences that affect training situations—differences like those described above. Focus on the characteristics of cultures represented in your classes. Analyze how these different cultures might work together on common tasks and objectives.

■ Use a variety of training methods, but modify standard approaches. For example, distribute role-play materials in advance so participants can learn and rehearse the situations. Make role-play participation optional; simply discuss the scenario if role playing is uncomfortable. Focus on demonstrating new skills. Avoid public feedback, even (and sometimes especially) if the feedback is complimentary.

■ Distribute *all* materials well in advance to demonstrate your preparedness and professionalism; this also helps trainees who do not read or speak English well. Make sure your graphics and visual aids look professional.

■ Be prepared to explain training situations. Detail your role, what you expect of learners, and how class-

room interaction will work. Be specific about behavioral rules. If you plan to call on individuals, tell your trainees. Then tell them how they can signal you *not* to call on them.

■ Consider varying the usual order of events. Be prepared to begin classes in a formal atmosphere, leaving introductions until just before the first break. Don't try to force the pace. Friendly relationships *will* develop—but through shared classroom camaraderie rather than formal classroom exercises.

■ Don't use written reaction forms to gauge your session's effectiveness. Follow up individually—and ask for suggestions rather than criticisms. Be prepared for indirect or oblique feedback; listen for the subtleties.

The result of all these nontraditional instructional techniques? Better training.

Multicultural audiences can be demanding, but what they demand is more of a good trainer's best: creativity, flexibility, intellectual agility, and a genuine passion for helping people learn and develop.

Heard in Passing

This handy oratorical device delivered by Fred Otte, Georgia State University professor of adult education and HRD, near the end of a lengthy talk:

"In conclusion . . . That really makes you pay attention, doesn't it?!"

"In Practice" is edited and written by John Wilcox. Send items of interest to: In Practice, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke St., Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.

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