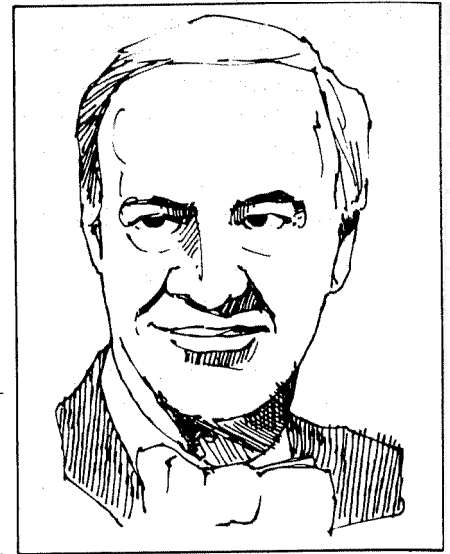


MALCOLM KNOWLES ON . . .



"SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT ENVIRONMENT AND LEARNING — EDUCATIONAL ECOLOGY, IF YOU LIKE"

For some years now I believe that I have sensed intuitively that the kind of environment in which training takes place affects the quality of learning that results. Even 30 years ago, I spoke about "creating a climate conducive to learning," speculating that learning would be superior in environments in which people feel respected, trusted, cared about, safe, supported, comfortable, open, noncompetitive and the like.

A little over a decade ago, my intuition began being supported by scholarly research. A growing number of social psychologists began focusing their investigations on the relationship between environment and human behavior, discovering that behavior is significantly influenced by such environmental characteristics as density, color, noise level, access to information, and other variables. This field of study has been labeled both "Ecological Psychology" and "Human Physics." Its findings have a good deal to contribute to our effectiveness as human resource developers.

I'd like to devote this month's column to sharing with you some thoughts I have gained from this research as well as from my own experience and from reports by colleagues concerning the characteristics of a climate that is conducive to learning.

"Policy Environment"

Let's start with what might be called the "policy environment,"

which as I see has two aspects: structural and substantive. By structural I mean the status given to the training function in the organizational hierarchy. In the early days, during the evolution of our field, the training function was merely a secondary aspect of the line operation — an extra duty of the master craftsmen, foremen, supervisors, department heads and managers. Then as personnel management became differentiated as a function, responsibility for training tended to become subsumed under it — with people whose main job was hiring, appraising and firing doing training with their left hands.

Since World War II, there has been a strong movement toward separating out the responsibility for human resources development into independent units reporting directly to top management. I believe that this trend reflects a growing recognition on the part of top management that training is becoming a field of professional specialization with its own body of knowledge, theory and technology regarding adults as learners. And it is certainly my observation that those firms that have accorded the training function a respectable status in the organizational structure get superior results from their training programs.

Even with relatively autonomous administrative status, however, the training unit is likely to be *unable* to come up to its full potential for service unless it is

undergirded by a substantive statement of institutional policy. From an analysis of policy statements from a variety of institutions, I have arrived at the conclusion that those in which adult education is strongest, the following criteria apply in formulating their policies.

1. The role that training is to have in contributing to the accomplishment of the institution's mission is described clearly and with commitment.

2. A philosophical position as to the absolute value of human growth and development as an instrument for achieving corporate goals is explicitly stated.

3. The specific purposes (in terms of individual and organizational outcomes) for which the training program is established are described, but with latitude for the dynamic exploration of new possibilities for service.

4. The nature of the commitment of resources by the policy makers to the furtherance of human resources development is made clear, and is substantial.

5. The relationship of the training component with other components of the organization is specified, preferably with emphasis on their processes of collaboration rather than on their divisions of responsibility and authority.

6. The target populations to be served by the program are specified.

7. Any limitations placed by the policy makers on the authorized

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scope of activities are clearly stated.

8. Any special provisions for financial management and budgetary practices are specified.

In short, the foundation for providing an environment that is conducive to learning is a respectable organizational status and a supportive policy backing. I think it would be useful to ASTD members if we reproduced a few examples of excellent policy statements. (I would be glad to include sample statements in future columns if you would send them to me.)

Facilitating Learning

So far I have been talking only about the policy support for an educative environment. The environment that participates experience directly is the one in which meetings take place, so let's take a look at the characteristics that facilitate learning in the meeting rooms.

First, regarding the *physical* environment: It must be easy for participants to interact with one another. The ideal arrangement is for participants to be seated at tables of five or six persons to a table with one end of the table pointed toward the trainer's work spot. The least desirable arrangement is for the chairs to be in rows facing a podium. It must be comfortable. Chairs should be large enough and soft enough for adult bottoms. "Smoking" and "non-smoking" sections must be designated if smoking is permitted. Temperature and ventilation must also be right.

The physical environment should be aesthetically pleasing. The decor must be attractive and convey human warmth. The closer it comes to looking like a living room in a home the better. Colors should be on the bright side of the rainbow. It must be neither too crowded nor too spacious for the number of participants.

But even more important is the *psychological* climate: It exudes a

spirit of mutual respect. Participants feel that the trainer and fellow participants value the experience they are bringing into the environment and make use of it as a resource for learning. They value the wide range of differences among themselves as enriching the educative quality of the environment. They sense that the trainer values their contributions.

It is supportive and caring. People feel safe and unthreatened. They feel free to express themselves openly. It is warm and friendly. Not only do participants feel respected; they feel liked. They call one another by first name — including the trainer. It is collaborative rather than competitive. Participants are eager to share what they know and can do and to help one another. It is a climate of mutual trust and mutual responsibility. Participants see the

trainers as human beings — indeed, as fellow learners — not as authority figures there to control, embarrass, or manipulate them. They accept responsibility to help in making decisions that affect their learning; they are not afraid to take initiative. It is a place in which the emphasis is on *learning*, not on teaching. If it were being televised, the cameras would be focused on what is happening to the learners, not what the trainer is doing.

How does one bring such a psychological climate into being? All I can tell you is how I do it. In all my workshops and courses I devote the first hour to climate setting. I believe that the first hour of any educational activity is the most important of all the hours in the activity. That is when the climate starts getting set.

I have a rule of thumb that there

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is never more than 10 minutes of front-end talk (welcoming, introductions, etc.) before participants are put into an active role, thus immediately setting the norm that learning is an active process. What I do is to put participants into groups of five or six (preferably sitting around tables) and ask them to share these four things in their small groups:

1. What their current work roles are and how they got there.

2. One thing about each participant that will enable the others to see him or her as a unique individual — a human interest story.

3. Any resources that they bring with them from their previous training or experience that are relevant to the content of the workshop or course that they would be willing to make available for the learning of others.

4. Any questions, problems, concerns or issues they are hoping this workshop will deal with. (I ask one member of each group to volunteer to make notes and give

us a summary of these concerns.)

After about 30 or 40 minutes of sharing this information, I get the data out for the whole audience by asking them to raise their hands if they fit into any of the categories I shout out. The categories I ask them to identify with are (1) institutional settings they work in (unless they are all from the same setting); (2) functional roles (administrators, program developers, teachers or trainers, media specialists, etc.); and (3) geographical locations, if appropriate. Then I ask them to indicate what resources they have, such as experience with competency-based education, contract learning, individualized instruction, etc. Then I invite participants to share any especially interesting human interest stories that surfaced in their groups. Finally, I invite the "reporters" to share their groups' questions, problems and concerns.

After all these data are out, I ask participants to call out adjectives

that describe the climate as they experience it now. Such terms as "warm," "informal," "respectful," "cooperative," "trusting," "safe" and "humorous" usually fill the atmosphere. I conclude by pointing out that these are characteristics of a climate that is conducive to learning.

Here's a Bibliography . . .

For those of you who are interested in pursuing the inquiry into ecological psychology in more depth, here are a few basic references:

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