

Address The Right Issues!

BY TOD WHITE

You have a great career opportunity. The people business is hot! In the '50s, '60s and '70s, finance and marketing were the fast track fields. Today, the big growth fields are computers and people. Career advancement opportunities for human resource professionals are tremendous because top-level managers are finally recognizing that the success of their organizations really does depend on people.

The importance of genuine support from top management can't be overstated. But, it isn't enough. Human resource professionals will not succeed by pursuing the same old goals in the same old ways. New issues are before us.

In this article, I will address four types of issues:

1. Issues affecting organizations.
2. Issues affecting individuals in organizations.
3. Issues regarding organizational-individual relationships.
4. Issues regarding the role of the training and development professional.

Organizational Issues

What are the key human resource issues felt by chief executive officers? To answer this question, I asked the presidents of Fortune 200 and Fortune 50 companies an open question — alternative answers were not provided:

"What do you believe will be the three most important issues involving human resources in your organization during the next few years?"

Here's how the presidents in the survey answered the question.

1. The most frequently mentioned issue, from over 60 percent, was "identifying and developing the next generation of managers." Or, as one president said, "The most important issue is structuring career development programs that will provide management regeneration over the next generation."

These presidents know key people are leaving and that the bench is weak. In a major oil company, for example, 160 of the top 200 managers will retire during the next five years and there are too few back-ups. Demographics is part of the problem. Managers in their 40s and 50s, the traditional age group of higher-level managers, are in short supply. Accelerating the development of younger managers must be a major objective for training and development professionals in the '80s.

2. The second most frequently mentioned issue, by over 50 percent, was "increasing productivity." The vast majority of presidents believe productivity is intertwined with changing employee values. As one president said, "We need to design new motivational

approaches to address productivity goals in a manner realistically related to current social trends." Or, as another said, "Creating a balance between productivity needs and job enrichment objectives." Or, as yet a third president said, "Motivating personnel to achieve maximum results with maximum personal satisfaction in a period of changing values."

3. Another issue, mentioned by about 50 of the presidents, was complying with EEO and other government regulations affecting personnel. Presidents feel government regulation is very excessive — but, they know they must comply.

4. A fourth issue is compensation. They see a big problem in these inflationary times. One president expressed the issue very well: "Gearing salary and benefit costs in an inflationary environment to the realities of the company's earning power by finding innovative compensation designs which relate positively to trends in our society." That's a mouthful, but he clearly sees a big problem and knows he needs help solving it.

Clearly, chief executives now recognize the importance of their human resources. Hard-nosed as they are about bottom-line results, they know success happens through people. They know *their* success depends on being able to develop and motivate managers.

They're giving us a tough job to do — but, and this is the key point, top management *wants* new approaches. Top management is more supportive of personnel programs than it's ever been. Top management expects more from us and it's watching to see if we produce. If we do, the rewards will be there. We'll finally join the management team. Of course, with greater rewards go greater risks. Companies simply can't afford to have a poor performer in charge of management development any more.

So, some of the issues facing us in the '80s are defined by top management:

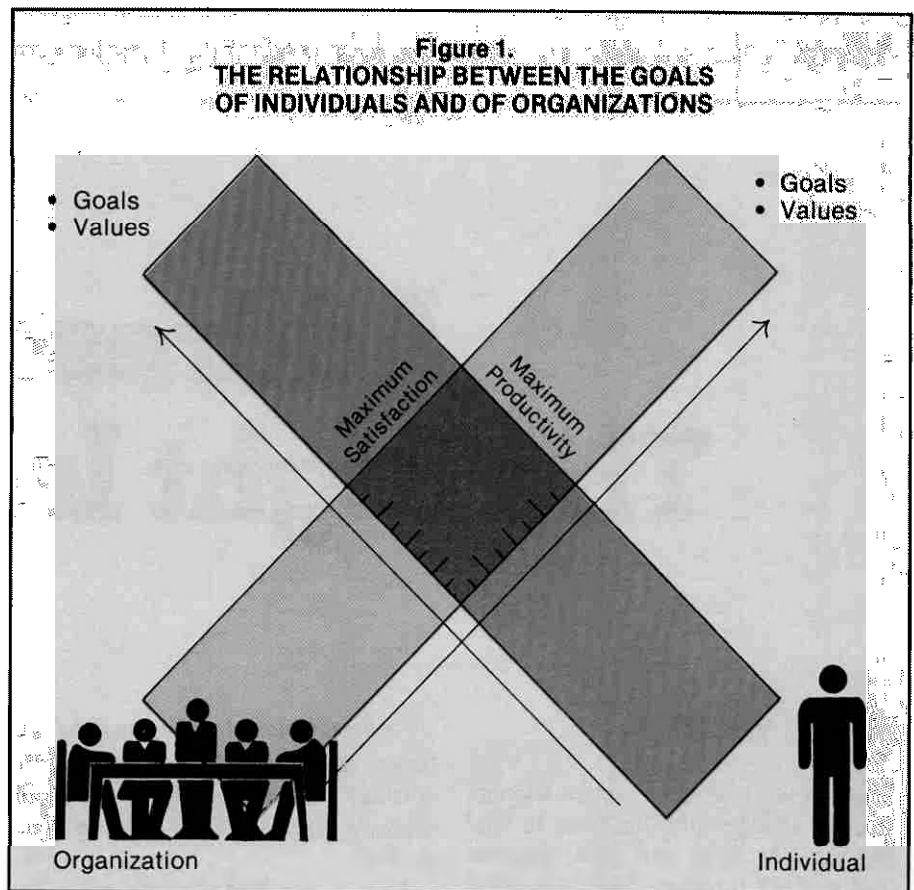
1. Developing the next generation of managers
2. Increasing productivity
3. Providing new incentives to motivate workers with new values
4. Assuring compliance with government regulations affecting personnel.

Individual Issues

Our job isn't simply to meet needs defined by top management. Our responsibility includes — or at least our strategy for meeting management's goals must include — addressing the issues as defined by individuals.

Workers at all levels are reporting a lower level of job satisfaction than they have in 25 years. This is the conclusion of the Opinion Research Corporation (ORC) and, it's supported by surveys done by Yankelovich and several other researchers. Opinion Research Corporation has been measuring employee attitudes for more than 25 years. In response to the question, "How do you like your job?", about 75 percent said "very much" in 1950. It stayed at about 75 percent year after year until 1970. It has gone down every single year since then to a current low of about 60 percent. This is true of managers, professionals, clericals and hourly manufacturing.

Another question ORC asks is, "How would you rate this company as a place to work compared to what it was when you started here?" Each year through the '60s, about 50 percent said "better than it was." Each year since 1970, it has decreased. It now stands at



only 25 percent saying "better."

My interpretation of this decreased satisfaction is that jobs haven't changed to provide less satisfaction, but that workers have raised their expectations. People *expect* more satisfaction from work. And, they expect us — or top management expects us — the people experts, to deal with this problem of decreasing satisfaction.

We're in a tough position. We must meet the organization's need for increased productivity and, at the same time, the individual's needs for increased satisfaction. Sometimes these objectives are in conflict. Figure 1 describes this relationship between the goals of individuals and the goals of organizations.

What are these goals of organizations? They include business goals regarding profit, growth, share of market, new markets, new products — and they include goals which impact us directly such as succession planning, productivity and affirmative action.

Since the mid-'50s, people like Herzberg, Maslow and MacGregor have made an important contribution by calling our attention to the

importance of *motivation* as a key factor in performance. However, these same authors have perhaps done as much harm as good by stating or implying that most workers share the same motivations. Contrary to some theorists, not all workers want more recognition, and money is a very powerful motivator for many people. We also find the vast majority of people at all levels do not value increased responsibility.

The important point for us as people experts is that motivation and job satisfaction are very personal matters. Group generalizations don't work. Individuals expect more satisfaction from work — as measured against their own personal criteria. But, we also know that most people don't know what their personal criteria are. People expect more, but they're not sure more what! One of our most important jobs is to help individuals clarify their own values so we can unleash their energy and get their commitment to change their behavior on the job. It is through individuals that our organizational objectives will be achieved.

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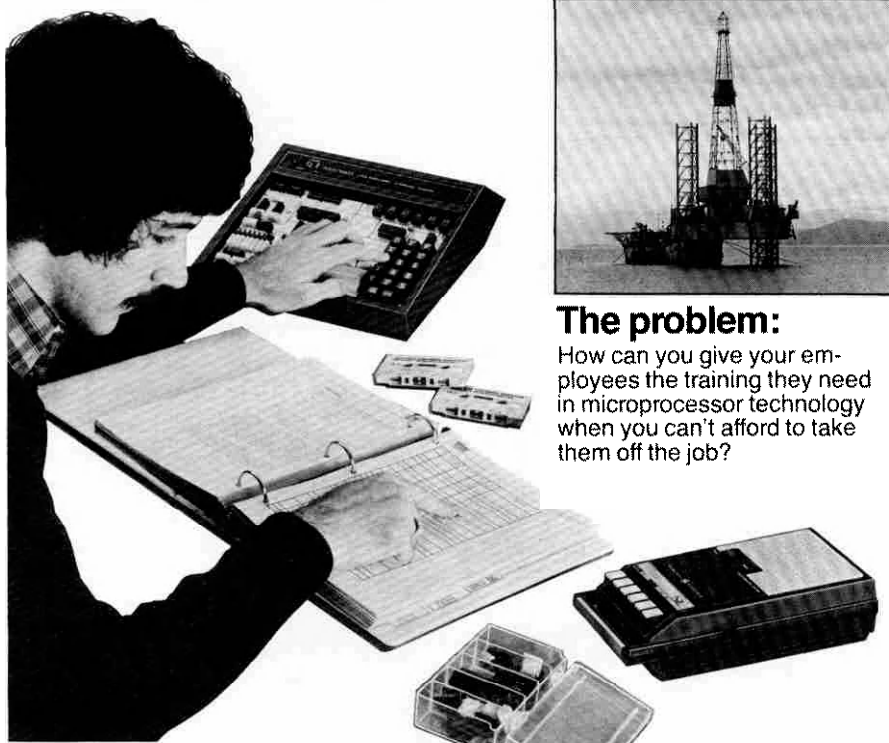
in microprocessor training

Clearly, one of the major issues of the '80s is to help individuals accept responsibility for managing their own career development and job satisfaction. Related to this is the issue of creating a partnership between individuals and the organization. The most important step in this direction is to open communications between individuals and their manager. Much more discussion needs to take place about goals — of the job, of the individual; about individual strengths and weaknesses; about ideas for improving productivity and job satisfaction. MBO, Performance Appraisal, Quality Control Circles, and Career Development programs are all different ways of attacking this issue. But, more effort is needed. Any human resource activity which does not provide payoff for both the organization and the individual is doomed to failure. Test your own activities against this criterion. For example, what specific benefits will be produced by your new performance appraisal process for the organization? . . . for the individual?

We've got a big job to do — meeting organizational issues, meeting individuals' issues. Now, I want to address a fourth key issue. How qualified are we to do the job? Do you have the skills to be successful? What are these skills?

When I surveyed the presidents of Fortune 200 and Fortune 50 companies, I asked them a second question: "For a human resource manager or training director to be truly effective, what do you feel are the three most important *personal* attributes or *talents* he/she must possess?" Again, alternative answers were *not* provided. It was a totally open question.

The single most frequent answer was, "He or she *must know* the company's business." One president says, "Our Human Resource Manager must have intimate knowledge of the mission of the corporation as well as the strategies that will drive that mission in order to design appropriate personnel policies and programs." Or as another says, "We want human resource people who can grasp the big picture and understand our direction



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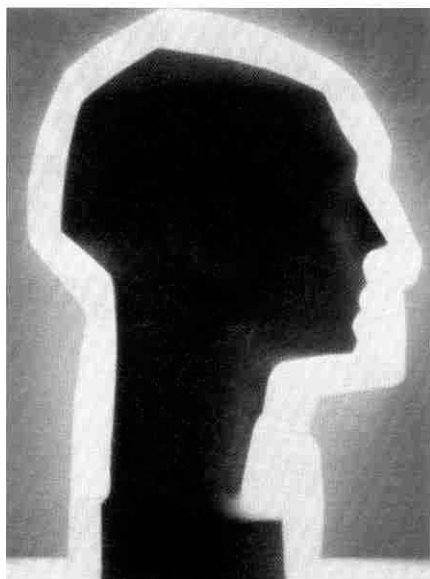
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for the future; then address their efforts toward implementing programs that will help us achieve our goals."

"Knowing the business of the business" is the most important quality of an effective human resource professional. The first step to your success is to "Know what your buyer wants and needs." Too often, I'm afraid, we talk too much to each other and not enough to the line managers who are our main customers. Too often, we look to each other for direction, when *we should be analyzing the long-range goals of our own organization and asking, "How can I best contribute to the achievement of these goals?"* Finding the right answers to this question is certainly high on the list of "secrets for success as a human resource professional."

The *second* most frequent talent or quality of an effective human resource manager or training director mentioned by presidents in our survey was "knows behavioral



science/knows personnel technology" — in other words, "is professionally competent." To us, this may be obvious. However, it's good news that presidents recognize that the body of knowledge in our field is now quite considerable. It takes a pro to do our job! It wasn't very many years ago that training, and personnel in general,

were felt to be such undemanding jobs that that was where you put your brother-in-law or some manager who couldn't do anything else. We've come a long way!

The third talent or quality, stated by over 50 percent of the presidents, is a bit more difficult to define with a word — so I'll use several: "flexibility, initiative, innovative, courageous." Some quotes: "The flexibility to adopt unique training concepts to the needs of the moment and at the same time moving toward the needs of the future." Another president said, "An ability to weigh and balance seemingly conflicting objectives." A third says, "The courage and skill to convince and motivate line managers to seek both short-term operational objectives and longer-range human resource development objectives."

These presidents seem to understand clearly the difficulties of our task: Conflicting priorities, uncooperative line managers, tight budgets. Yet, just as clearly, they expect us to have the skill, the tenacity and the quickness of foot to overpower or sidestep these problems. Certainly our task is no tougher than any other manager's. It's just that management cares more than they used to whether we fail or succeed. This challenge is our opportunity! The prospects for a prosperous, meaningful, satisfying career in human resources have never been brighter.

The opportunity exists for tremendous success. Yet some of us lack the vision to take advantage of this opportunity. Let me tell you three situations I've encountered which illustrate the problems some of us are having coping with success.

The first example involves the training manager of a division of a medium-sized company who developed a career development program. It was designed to help reduce turnover and to improve morale among professionals in the accounting department. She hoped that eventually the program might be made available to other departments in the division.

Well, unknown to her, the vice-

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president of her division attended a corporate-wide executive committee meeting. This was her boss' boss' boss' boss. He took "her" program and presented it to the executive committee. They loved it! It seemed an excellent way to help solve problems they all faced. Upon learning of this sudden support for her program, the heroine of our story was outraged. She had a plan for building support for the program — and this wasn't it! Put simply, she didn't know how to cope with success.

Here's another example. The training and development manager of a large manufacturing company had run a catalogue of courses for many years. He had a staff of trainers who taught them. Getting enrollments was always a problem because top management didn't support training. So they mostly taught non-exempts and first-level supervisors. He had quit trying to sell top management on training years ago.

Out of the blue, the vice president of the largest division called

him. The VP wanted to present a succession plan — including development plans for key people to the executive committee in a month and he needed help. Our hero, the training and development manager, told him "NO!" He was too busy. He recommended a consultant. Well, I've got nothing against consultants, but this is madness! After years of complaining about lack of top management support, this training director lacked the vision to see the very important role he was *personally* being asked to play. Obviously, this person wasn't ready for success.

Here's a third example. The training manager of a large bank was meeting with his staff of 10 or so. These staff members were each responsible for different training programs. One performance measure was the number of people enrolled in these various programs. A busy training department was a good training department. Well, this training manager did have vision. He reorganized his

staff. No longer would each person be responsible for a training program. Rather, each person would be responsible for meeting *all* the training needs of a department of the bank. Suddenly, their role had changed. Instead of being *program-oriented* and selling programs to lower-level managers, they were expected to be customer-oriented and do much more consulting with top-level managers . . . a great opportunity to enlarge their job —yet many resisted. They lacked vision. Their immediate concerns about the newness of the task *blinded* them to the tremendous opportunities for more meaningful success.

The biggest barrier to capitalizing on our new opportunities for success can be our own lack of vision. To succeed, we must be open to new ideas, we must break some old habits. Many of the problems we're being asked to solve are new. New approaches will be needed. An obvious question is, "Are you ready for success?"

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How do we have to change to maximize our own effectiveness as managers and developers of our organization's human resources? I have four recommendations for maximizing our effectiveness as training and development professionals:

1. Know the tools of your trade — assess your skills as a professional trainer. If you have been in your job less than a year, it's a certainty you have gaps in your professional expertise that should be filled. If you're a proven pro, you should pinpoint your strengths and capitalize on them. Whatever your situation, you should have a plan for your own continued development.

2. My second bit of advice is to become more *customer oriented*. The presidents in our survey say the single most important qualification of a human resource professional is that he or she "knows the business of the business." Rule number one is "To know what your customer wants and needs."

Here's a sad story. A large, rapidly growing electronics company with at least a dozen Ph.D. behavioral scientists on its staff, recently appointed as VP of human resources an *engineer* who had been with the company 15 years, most recently as manager of inventory control. Why an engineer to head human resources? Simple. He knew the organization and had the trust of top management.

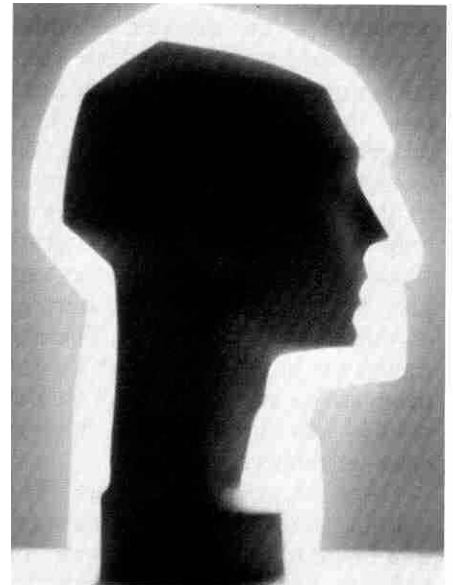
As a human resource professional myself, I strongly feel that job should have gone to a human resource pro. Yet the pros failed to qualify themselves. They were *not* customer oriented. They talked too much to each other and not enough to the top managers who used their services.

What can *you* do to become more customer oriented? Here are a few ideas:

- Take a line manager to lunch. Why not? At least once a week. Find out what he or she does, what problems they have.

- Transfer out of training for a year or two to a line department.

- Study the business plans, annual reports, news articles about your organization.



"Accelerating the development of younger managers must be a major objective for training and development professionals in the '80s."

- Identify your two or three most important customers and meet with them at least four times a year to learn about their goals and problems. Then ask yourself, "How can I help this manager?" Chances are some creative thinking will produce new ways to expand your role and increase your contribution.

- Here's an idea that's catching on in many organizations. . . . Form a training committee of line managers — or of the group you are particularly concerned with — maybe it's engineers, new hires, or secretaries. The point is to get your customers *involved* in defining their own problems and goals, in designing solutions, and in assessing success. When you have a real *partnership* with your customers, your success will soar.

3. My third bit of advice is "to *organize for success*." Jimmy Carter once said to a group of complaining citizens that "Life is not fair." Well, it's not totally unfair either. Outstanding performance is usually rewarded. The trick is to *get credit* for your successes.

Peter Drucker offers good advice: "Do the *right* things." Training, in and of itself, is *rarely* a goal anyone cares about. Training is an *activity*. When it's *organized* as an activity, success can be hard to define. For example, when the training department's mission is to administer a catalogue of programs, the measures of success tend to be "number of programs" and "number of people trained." Both are *cost* items — not success indicators. Little wonder that a catalogue training manager has trouble justifying the training budget.

To "organize for success" means to define projects and programs in terms top management cares about. Here are several examples — I stress they are only examples:

- "Manager of human resource planning and development" might be the title. The *responsibility* of this position is to assure that the organization has the human resources required to achieve its two to five year business goals. This is a *result*, not an activity!

Training is part of the job, but so is studying the long-range plans of the business, so is coordinating with the recruiting manager, so is one-on-one consulting with key managers.

Because this job has a very specific purpose, success is easy to assess: The organization either has quality people ready when needed to achieve its business goals or it doesn't.

Here are two more examples of success-oriented jobs:

- "Manager of New Employee Assimilation." The responsibility of this position is to get new employees up to speed as quickly as possible — a frequent objective, too, is to reduce turnover within the first couple of years. Again, training new employees is only part of the job. It often includes creating a "mentor system," training the managers of new employees, individual counseling and other activities that will cause a new employee to be productive more quickly. Again, because the job is organized for success, success is much more visible.

- "Manager of Performance Im-

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provement." The purpose of this position is to design and implement improved and integrated systems of goal setting, planning, performance appraisal, subordinate development and the like.

Implementing such systems almost always requires training — but, again, training is only part of the job.

I'm not saying that these three particular jobs should be created in all organizations. I am saying that training will be much more successful — and that the individual trainer will make a much more obvious contribution to the organization — if the activity of training is subordinated to a bigger purpose, a purpose that top management cares about.

Though it might sound like hearsay, I'm not at all adverse to abolishing the title "manager of training." And, it's happening in many organizations. Now's the time to enlarge your job, to integrate training with *other* activities

to achieve a bigger purpose.

You don't have to be a vice-president or director to "organize for success." Almost any training activity can be defined in terms of its bigger purpose and then enlarged to become totally responsible for achieving this purpose. For example, a new trainer with a big company in California was told to "do something for the secretaries in headquarters." Well, rather than just run them through a training program, she determined that turnover and recruiting were the problems. Morale was down and the company did not have a good reputation among secretaries in the city. So in organizing for success, she defined as her goal, "To establish a reputation for Company X as the best place for a secretary to work." She formed a committee of secretaries to brainstorm improvement ideas. She conducted a "personal growth" workshop for all secretaries. She conducted meetings with manag-

ers to prepare them to be more supportive of secretaries. She publishes a quarterly newsletter to secretaries — and, she convinced the local newspaper to run an article about all the wonderful things that were happening for secretaries at Company X. Her success was obvious. And, she's been promoted twice since initiating this project.

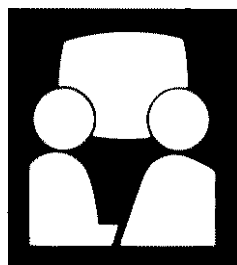
"Organizing for success" is more than just becoming more goal oriented — it means expanding your job to include responsibility for more of the factors that affect achievement of the goal. The person who concentrates just on training will experience much less satisfaction and success than the person who, with broader vision, focuses on the *results* training is to produce.

I have one final bit of advice and it's this: Do it now! When management comes to training with a problem, they want it solved yesterday. A great case can be made for studying the situation, for doing a needs analysis, for building conceptual frameworks and the like. But none of this solves the problem. If management is patient with all this analysis, then the problem usually isn't worth solving. If management cares, do it now! Even if your action isn't perfect, you'll get high marks for responsiveness — and, you'll learn by doing. From experience you'll refine your actions.

I'm sorry to say, but I've known several people who were hired into important training jobs only to be fired before the year was out! They spent months doing needs analyses when management hired them to solve problems. The time to do a needs analysis is before you take a new job — not after. Reputations are often made during the first few months on a job — the secret to success is to be a do-er! As one sage HR pro says, "It's much easier to get forgiveness than approval." The error of omission is becoming more dangerous than the error of commission.

Tod White is president, Blessing/White, Inc., Princeton, NJ.

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