

# PREPARING EMPLOYEES FOR UPWARD MOBILITY

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What happens when employees have the technical competence but lack some of the interpersonal skills and self-confidence necessary to compete for promotional opportunities? The typical results are the underutilization of talent in the workforce and a loss of human resources which could be developed. Outcomes such as these are costly from the standpoint of both the organization and the employees.

This problem would be easier to solve if we were talking about one individual who displayed a discrepancy between technical and interpersonal competence. The issues involved, however, become more complex when it is found that this discrepancy prevents a significant number of employees from functioning in jobs at their full potential. This was exactly the situation at the Austin Service Center of the Internal Revenue Service, where federal income tax returns from six of the eight states in the South-west Region are processed.

The Austin Service Center want-

ed to promote more women into positions above the GS-7 pay level. While many factors could contribute to a concentration of women in lower salary grades, in-house assessment identified that one variable appeared to be a lack of the assertiveness necessary to compete for advancement. It was, of course, recognized that men as well as women could be underemployed for this reason and, therefore, any solution would need to aim at development of all employees in lower salary grades, regardless of sex.

The purpose of this article is to describe a training program developed as part of the upward mobility effort at the Austin Service Center to systematically increase assertiveness and other job-related interpersonal skills, and to report the results of initial pilot-testing conducted on the program.

## Training Design Description

Once the problem had been identified, the next step was to come up with a plan of action. Management agreed to expand the narrow concept of assertive training to a

broader view which regarded assertiveness as one of several relevant job-related interpersonal skills which, when used constructively, could be an asset to employees aspiring to positions with more responsibility. It was concluded, therefore, that training should be directed toward improving skills in listening, communication, decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict resolution, as well as assertiveness. The program which resulted was called Interpersonal Relations Training for Upward Mobility, or simply the IRT Program.

The senior author was retained on a contractual basis to develop the IRT Program. From the outset, it was determined that three major considerations should guide the design and implementation of the training: (1) the curriculum should be based on actual problem situations identified at the Austin Service Center, (2) the organization should be provided with the in-house capability to deliver training on a continuing basis to groups of employees, and (3) the design should include an evaluation com-

ponent which would allow for an objective assessment of training outcomes. The role of the external consultant was limited to writing the curriculum, training IRS personnel how to teach the course, and evaluating the results of the training.

The problem situations used in the IRT Program were identified during a series of meetings with the Equal Employment Opportunity Advisory Committee at the Austin Service Center. The next step was to construct an appropriate training design. It was assumed that people often lack effective interpersonal skills because they have had insufficient opportunities to learn them in the past. It was further assumed that a design which aimed toward developing the overall interpersonal judgment of employees, in contrast to a model based on the shaping of specific responses, would permit greater transfer of skills to on-the-job problems which could not be predicted in advance.

"Interpersonal judgment" was defined as the ability to evaluate in advance the potential effects of a variety of responses, and to select a response which would have a high probability of bringing about a constructive result. Accordingly, the training approach selected was based on a learning-through-discovery model. Instead of telling people how to solve problems, the IRT program was designed so they could discover for themselves which problem-solving approaches work best.

Another major design factor required was a training package assembled in such a manner that it could be presented by IRS employees who had no previous background in the behavioral sciences. Essentially, the curriculum needed to "present itself," with the instructor serving primarily as a facilitator or catalyst responsible for establishing the proper climate for learning, and guiding participants through a variety of structured learning activities.

The component parts of the IRT Program consisted of videotape vignettes, group discussion, and role-play practice exercises.

Twelve videotape vignettes or stories were developed which showed "employees" interacting

with "managers." Each vignette presents a problem situation and shows an "employee" handling the problem in four or five different ways. Both the problem situations and alternative "employee" responses were identified during the series of meetings held with the Equal Employment Opportunity Advisory Committee.

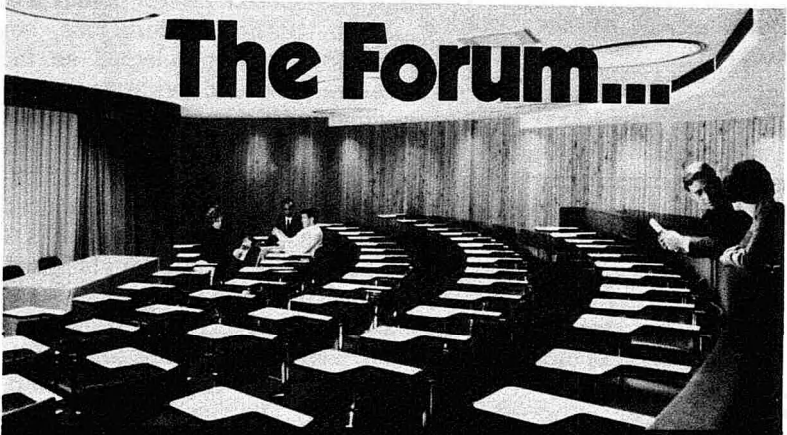
In the development of the vignettes, no attempt was made to specify the best response to the problem situation. The purpose of the vignette was to demonstrate that a variety of alternatives exist for responding to any given problem, and that each alternative can be evaluated in terms of its potential consequences, both positive and negative. The primary reason that actual problems were used in developing the scripts for the videotapes was to help participants identify with the "employee" in the vignettes, and ask themselves the question, "What would I do if I was faced with this situation?"

Each vignette describes the problem situation and shows several "employee" responses, but does

not show the "manager" reacting to the responses. This was done deliberately to help simulate problem situations as they occur in real life. In dealing with actual problems, people do not know in advance how another person will react to something they say or do. To be effective in solving problems, people must evaluate the pros and cons of a variety of possibilities before responding. This allows them to select a response which has a high probability of solving the problem. Thus, the vignettes are intended to help participants evaluate alternatives, which is the first step toward increasing interpersonal judgment and problem-solving skills.

### Group Discussion

After each vignette has been played, participants discuss the pros and cons of each "employee" response. The chief purpose of the discussion is to thoroughly review potential consequences of each response, and to provide group members with a chance to suggest responses which weren't shown on videotape. It is through group




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discussion that participants come to realize more fully that there is no one perfect way to solve the problem. They learn to take into consideration such factors as the personality of the manager, the context within which the problem has developed, the timing of the response, etc. Group discussion permits participants to benefit from the thinking of others and to work together in a creative, team approach to problem-solving. It is through this process that they begin to discover for themselves which approaches work best.

Following group discussion, the group participates in role-play practice exercises. The purpose of role-play is to provide a transition between thinking and doing. When participants are watching a vignette they are essentially passive observers. During group discussion they become involved in verbal exchanges, although their ideas are still theoretical and untested. It is through role-play practice that participants gain direct experience in discovering new behaviors. Since interpersonal skill development depends upon the ability to actually engage in constructive action, the role-play practice is the most important aspect of the training program.

### The Role of the Facilitator

As was indicated above, one of the major features of the IRT Program was that it provided the Austin Service Center with the in-house capability to present the training to groups of employees. The selection and training of facilitators, therefore, was of paramount significance.

After a number of alternatives were considered, it was decided that facilitators should come from the ranks of the employees for which this training was intended. The primary reason for this was the expectation that peers of the participants could establish rapport with them more readily than either managers, in-house trainers or external consultants.

In the selection process, division chiefs were requested to nominate individuals who (1) were regarded as exemplary employees by management, (2) had the respect of their peers, and (3) were already functioning effectively with respect

**Table 1.**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC DATA ON THE IRT FACILITATORS AND PARTICIPANTS IN THE PILOT IRT CLASSES**

	Facilitators (N = 7)		Participants (N = 24)	
Race	Hispanic	2	Hispanic	5
	Black	1	Black	3
	White	4	White	16
Sex	Female	6	Female	19
	Male	1	Male	5
Age	25 or under	0	25 or under	6
	26-35	4	26-35	11
	36-45	2	36-45	4
	46-55	1	46-55	2
	Over 55	0	Over 55	1
Tenure with IRS	Under 5 yrs	0	Under 5 yrs	4
	5-10 years	5	5-10 years	20
	11-15 yrs	2	11-15 yrs	0
	16-20 yrs	0	16-20 yrs	0
	Over 20 yrs	0	Over 20 yrs	0
Salary Grades	GS-2	0	GS-2	0
	GS-3	0	GS-3	0
	GS-4	0	GS-4	6
	GS-5	2	GS-5	9
	GS-6	0	GS-6	9
	GS-7	3	GS-7	0
	GS-8	2	GS-8	0

to job-related interpersonal skills. From the list of nominees, seven employees were selected as facilitators. These individuals were provided with a trainer's manual and participated in a 10-day course taught by the senior author to prepare them to serve as facilitators for the IRT Program. (NOTE: Three other individuals participated in this course: a representative from the IRS National Training Center in Washington, D.C., an employee on the training staff at the IRS District Office in Austin, and an employee on the training staff at the Austin Service Center.) In evaluating the IRT Program, data for these three individuals was collected and analyzed along with data for the seven facilitators. Demographic information for the seven facilitators from the Austin Service Center is summarized in Table 1.

The 10-day facilitator training course was broken down into two major segments. The first week consisted of minilectures and practice exercises on listening, task-group leadership, group process, and the role-play technique. During

the second week each facilitator took turns actually presenting a videotape vignette, and then leading the rest of the group in discussion and role-play practice.

Following their performance, each facilitator received both verbal and written feedback from other group members and from the senior author. Throughout the second week of training, every attempt was made to simulate the conditions under which the facilitators would be conducting the training with groups of employees.

The role of the IRT facilitator is not to present content, but to establish an effective climate for learning and guide group process as it emerges from (1) stimulus material provided in the videotape vignettes, (2) group discussion, and (3) role-play practice exercises. The principle technique used by the facilitators to guide group process is to ask open-ended questions.

After presenting a videotape vignette the facilitator may stimulate group discussion by asking questions such as the following:

1. What are the pros and cons of each employee response?

2. What do you think the manager's reaction would be to these responses?

3. Can you think of any other ways that the employee could have handled the problem?

4. If so, what are the pros and cons of each new alternative?

Similarly, after a role-play practice exercise, the facilitator can ask some of the above questions, and/or those listed below:

1. How do you feel about what happened during the role-play?

2. How effective do you feel this approach would be in solving the problem?

3. If you could do the role-play again, is there anything you would change?

To maintain a climate conducive to learning throughout the IRT Program, facilitators were asked to avoid giving their opinions regarding either the various responses presented on the videotape vignettes, or how they would handle the problem situation. It was explained to the facilitators that their opinions would carry the weight of correct answers, which could interfere with the ability of some participants to develop the judgment necessary to discover their own solutions.

Facilitators were also cautioned against making evaluative or judgmental statements, such as, "I don't think that would work very well because . . ." Such comments tend to increase defensiveness and lower the willingness of participants to become actively involved in group discussion and role-play practice. Basically, the facilitator provides participants with an opportunity to examine their ideas and try out new behaviors in a nonthreatening atmosphere. The extent, however, to which participants evaluate their ideas and take steps to practice new interpersonal skills is completely up to them.

### Method of Pilot Testing

As part of the Upward Mobility Program at the Austin Service Center, a number of job positions are identified as "target positions". Each target position has a structured career ladder of two or more salary grade levels. The purpose of the target position concept is to provide upward mobility for lower-level employees who can enter a job

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position with potential for noncompetitive promotion. For example, a target position with a career ladder of GS-4/5/6 could be filled by an employee who is qualified for a GS-4 or 5, but not for a GS-6.

Pilot testing of the IRT Program was conducted with persons who were selected for jobs that were identified as target positions. A total of four, three-day classes were held in 1976 (one with seven participants). In 1977 one class was conducted with six participants, and in 1978 one class was held with five participants. Three different facilitators were involved in conducting the classes (one facilitator conducted two classes). Class size was deliberately kept small so every participant had ample opportunity to engage in group discussion and role-play practice. Demographic data for participants in the pilot classes is summarized in Table 1.

Both at the beginning and end of the 10-day facilitator training course, the students were asked to watch all of the alternative "employee" responses on each of the 12 videotape vignettes, and select the response they felt would be "Most Effective" in solving the problem, and the response they felt would be "Least Effective" (N=10). This same procedure was used at the beginning and end of the four, three-day pilot classes taught by the facilitators (N=24). The resulting pre/post data provided a measure of the effects the training had on facilitator and participant perceptions of effective and ineffective responses.

It should be noted that while there may or may not be "right" and "wrong" responses to the query: "Which is the most effective response for the employee in this situation?", we have for purposes of analysis adopted the position that a "most effective" and "least effective" response can be identified. These responses have been reached on the basis of "consensus" among a group of "experts." The authors plus the training officer and EEO coordinator at the Austin Service Center comprise the group of "experts" and a "consensus" was defined as constituting agreement among three of the four members.

In some cases the "experts", facilitators and participants reached almost total agreement as to "most

**Table 2.**  
**ANALYSIS OF SCORES**

Groups	N	Most Effective		Least Effective	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Experts	4	8.00	0	11.00	0
<b>Pre-Scores</b>					
Facilitators	10	5.50	1.58	4.70	2.06
Participants	24	5.21	1.18	3.04	1.73
<b>Post-Scores</b>					
Facilitators	10	5.70	1.16	6.90	1.52
Participants	24	4.75	1.48	5.04	2.20

effective," and these vignettes were eliminated from the analysis. Table 2 shows that there are eight vignettes for which a "most effective" response can be identified, and 11 vignettes where a "least effective" response was identified.

Table 2 also provides the means and standard deviations for the various groups. In analyzing the data, we were interested in determining whether or not significant changes from pre to posttesting occurred in the facilitator and participant groups on either of the measures. This question was reformulated into the following hypotheses, which are summarized below along with the results:

1. Facilitator mean postscores will exceed their mean prescores on the dimension of "most effective" response at a 5 percent level of significance. While the direction of change is in accord with the hypothesis (Pre 5.50 and Post 5.70) the change is not significant.

2. Facilitator mean postscores will exceed their mean prescores on the dimension of "least effective" response at a 5 percent level of significance. This hypothesis is accepted, since the premean is 4.7 and the postmean is 6.9, and the difference in the means is significant (t for a one-tailed test of significance, for paired observations = 4.13, df = 9, p<.01).

3. Participant mean postscores will exceed their mean prescores on the dimension of "most effective" response at a 5 percent level of significance. In this case the change is not in the predicted direction, but the amount of change is small (5.21-4.75).

4. Participant mean postscores

will exceed their mean prescores on the dimension of "least effective" response at a 5 percent level of significance. Here there is a significant change from a mean of 3.04 to a mean of 5.04 (t = 3.97, df = 23, p<.01).

The above findings indicate that participation in the IRT Program leads to an improvement in one's ability to recognize ineffective responses, which is the first step toward avoiding unconstructive behavior in problem situations. This outcome is especially significant when it is considered that the total number of subjects was quite small.

Further research should be quite useful in pointing out how the program can be modified to help participants demonstrate more substantial improvement in their ability to recognize effective responses. Nevertheless, the results of the pilot test clearly show that the changes which take place during the IRT Program are consistent with the original objectives for this training effort. It can be anticipated, therefore, that the IRT Program will help the Internal Revenue Service more fully actualize its strong commitments to upward mobility and human resource development.

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