The Trouble With Sensitivity Training

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Many speaking dates I am requested to make seem to be those in which I am asked to attack something or other. In the past ten years I've been author of critical speeches or articles on such diverse topics as engineers, appraisals, operations research, college recruiting, industrial training, and college students. It didn't surprise me, then, when Cornell recently invited me to take part in a debate, and take the stance, "What's Wrong With Sensitivity Training." Such a critical paper on sensitivity training is long overdue. For a form of experimental endeavor to have gone on for more than a decade without more than half a dozen even mildly negative articles or comments being published is somewhat surprising.[1] The absence of criticism of it may account for the fact that there is no research whatsoever that proves its worth in changing behavior. If more criticism had been forthcoming, it might now be on sounder ground. I hope to help alleviate this shortcoming somewhat.

Unlike my prior efforts of a critical nature, it has been my experience that one who criticizes sensitivity training is almost certain to incur personal attacks from the adherents. For those who fear arguments *ad hominium* it seems safer to abstain from making critical comments. Often these personalized rebuttals are a highly refined kind of *defensiveness* which go something like this: "The very fact that you attack sensitivity training indicates that you are in favor of autocratic management and therefore *need* sensitivity training to straighten out your personal inadequacies." The conclusion which is further arrived at is that anybody who sees flaws in sensitivity training is automatically incompetent to be critical because of that. This incompetence could of course be overcome if the critic were to undergo such training—or more of it.

The most damaging criticism of sensitivity training is that it has built into its system an automatic rejection of orderly, rational, conscious criticism. This itself is dangerous rigidity which should be corrected first.

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For a field of study to set itself above and immune to the attacks which every scholar and writer must willingly submit his ideas is prime evidence of weakness. Nor must all such criticism be couched in the rules of the "leaders" in the field. Valid science withstands every attack, including the specious and unfair.

What is Sensitivity Training?

The distinctive feature of sensitivity training is the T-Group. Other forms of training which are sometimes offered concurrently at laboratories are not unique to such labs. Role playing, lectures, and action training methods are used in all sorts of training programs of a non-laboratory nature. Most of the comments to which this article addresses itself are therefore pointed toward those labs which have featured T-Group Education. T-groups have also been defined as "developmental groups," "laboratory education," and "leaderless groups." Their essence is the playing down of any overt behavior on the part of the trainer, with the actions of the group during the sessions being determined by the members. Its emphasis is usually upon the "here and now" within a group which has no purpose assigned it by authority figures, but which the group usually understands to be a training session to study interpersonal relations in groups.

This paper is *not* a critique of training.

It is *not* a critique of role playing.

It is *not* a critique of action training.

It is a criticism of the T-Group, its underlying assumptions, and the cultish practices of many of its adherents.

In the absence of major criticism of the method, one must openly enquire "is this because it is perfect, or even mostly effective?" The answer here is clearly negative. The suspicions of many who attended that "The king has no clothes" is true.

A detailed study of the periodicals in which research reports on effectiveness of sensitivity training might have been reported between 1948 and 1961 shows that *not a single conclusive piece of research* has been reported which proves that sensitivity training changes behavior of trainees overtly back on the job. The best rigorously conducted evaluations of sensitivity labs have been done by Argyris[2] and Bass.[3] Each of these scholars have studied the behavior of people before and after lab experience. Argyris' study showed that the lab experience resulted in the class being better able to describe other members of the organization in interpersonal terms before and after training, and found that they could do so for those who had been through the training. They did not show improvement in describing behavior of colleagues who had not been through the lab however. His criteria of measurement was the ability to describe others' behavior. No direct tie is made to the training in the sense of showing that it was indeed the lab experience which had brought about the change. (Perhaps two weeks together in a submarine would have brought about the same behavior?) This new found verbal skill didn't apply at all when it came to describing those people who worked around them who hadn't been to the lab.

Post-evaluation questionnaires of the participants showed that the alumni

thought that the course was a fine thing. This tells us little. This is a common reaction to all management courses which have been well planned and seriously presented.[4]

Bass' studies showed that sensitivity training alumni were more perceptive of a popular movie's interpersonal relations than a control group which hadn't been through the course. His other studies showed that mood changes during sensitivity training followed changing patterns.

The important point here is that this is the limit of the factual research evidence that sensitivity training changes behavior. Neither of these evaluations show anything about behavior change on the job, nor do the 51 books, 68 articles, and 7 pamphlets on the subject published by other organizations. After thirteen years or more of laboratory training, then researchers find that not a single bit of proof exists in published form that laboratory training changes behavior.[5]

The criticisms of Lewinian Group Dynamics Theory which have taken up somewhat more space we can pass for the moment.[6] They are not especially relevant to the training director, whose principle concern is whether or not he should send his managers to a lab to be trained. The context of this discussion deals with sensitivity training as a means of changing management behavior.

Two recent reports have been added to the literature which by their findings might indicate that all is not well with the customary methods of sensitivity training. One study of a group in Denmark concedes that at least one important practitioner has been perplexed by the failure of sensitivity training to change behavior back on the job.[7] His trial solution was to combine coaching back on the job with lab experience which he reported anecdotally did bring change. Another article, frankly speculative theorizes that any effects of sensitivity training can be attributed to the informal atmosphere accompanying laboratory sessions, casual clothes, name tags, etc., which brings on regressive behavior in the attendees.[8] This too has been untested, but in the absence of other evidence is perfectly germane as an explanation.

Leading figures in the field flatly state that there is no evidence that sensitivity training changes behavior back on the job. Bass for example states:

> "Whether sensitivity training decreases sensitivity on the job or success as a leader on the job still has to be demonstrated."[9]

While the same criticisms apply to many training courses, there are empirical studies which demonstrate behavior change from other forms of training that has not been proven of T-Groups,[10] especially role play and discussion.

In the absence of any research evidence which demonstrates that sensitivity training changes behavior, we are left with nothing but anecdotal evidence and example drawn from experience. This qualifies any number of people to judge. The anecdotes which follow actually occurred.

Such evidence shows that sensitivity training is enjoyed by many who attend, viewed by suspicion with others, and on the negative side has had bad effects upon other individuals and organizations. Such anecdotal evidence is not hard to collect. This is especially true once one gets into places where the

fringe groups of unskilled practitioners have been selling numerous variations of sensitivity training to companies. Nor can the "serious" practitioners avoid responsibility for the numerous persons (of admittedly undetermined numbers) whose careers in business have been impeded, damaged or diverted by laboratory experimentation that intervenes in the serious business of a man and his boss relating to one another.

In the absence of any firm proof that the people leading the sensitivity training movement are *sure* of what they are doing we might well suggest that they retire from the important business of rendering advice about running a firm until they are certain they know what they are doing. Essentially they are *outsiders*. This role is perfectly acceptable and useful when the outsiders bring new and proven insights. When they bring unproven ideas which they hope to test, and allude to their validity and usefulness to the firm when they are actually unproven they should be rejected. Emerson put it "he has a right to meddle who has a heart to help." This too might be a basis for holding off on the use of sensitivity training for many trainers.

Is Sensitivity Training Really Training?

Training should change behavior. How can we demonstrate changed behavior? We should be able to measure it. One of the most common outcomes of sensitivity training is that the people who undergo it describe the experience as one which "I am sure has had an effect on me but it's too early to tell just how." These are the fortunate ones.

Anecdote No. 1

Not long ago a large engineering company in the midwest was prevailed upon by a consulting firm to bring a group of their research executives to a lodge in Wisconsin for sensitivity training. The leader of the session had no prior training in the conduct of such sessions. During one horrible weekend he broke down the barriers of formal courtesy which had substituted quite successfully for human relations in this successful lab for many years. People spoke frankly of their hostilities. At this point they went back to the lab, their dislikes laid bare, with no substitute behavior being provided. Chaos immediately took over. People who had worked in good-mannered pomposity for years, turning out patents and papers at a prodigious pace began to engage in organized politicking to get square. Senior scientists quit in droves and a major purge took place. Candid observations made up at the lake hung heavy between colleagues who had become accustomed to the equilibrium of their Ph.D. status systems, and they became human beings, which of course could ruin any good research organization. People who had learned that they were seen as SOB's were somewhat less than grateful to the colleague who had enlightened them and had made them aware of this fact. The duplicating department went on two shifts turning out resumes of people who wanted out. Several alcoholic conditions became active again.

This is training?

Training should produce changed behavior, which is further justified only by the possibility that this changed be-

havior contributes more to the goals of the organization than earlier behavior. To qualify as sound training it would seem that these criteria should be met.

Criteria No. 1

In good training the desired terminal behavior can be identified before the training begins. Sensitivity training simply doesn't do this. It rightfully can state that it will change the verbal behavior of some people who take part. It has little or no idea what any other terminal behavior will be, or whether it will be more or less productive than when the man started.

Anecdote No. 2

Not long ago I interviewed a young company president who had returned a month before from a sensitivity training lab conducted only for young presidents. Here's what he told me:

We sat around the Princeton Inn flagellating one another for days on end. After I graduated from Harvard Business School, I bought a gray flannel suit and some half glasses and went into the family business. Then I went to this thing. Now I have to get it out of my system that I am an incompetent slob who is riding on his ancestor's coattails. A lot of those guys spent the whole time crying about the vice presidents who run the business while they held the inherited stock. A few of them who married the boss's daughter wanted to have a public catharsis over the fact that nobody respected them because they were executives who married their job. One guy got plastered and kept me up until 3 a.m. telling me some horrible tales about his marital problems. I've got to keep busy to shake that horrible mess at Princeton and get back to making a buck for the company.

Here are some typical statements of terminal behavior sought by lab training:

- To achieve authenticity in interpersonal relations.
- To unfreeze managers minds.
- To develop self esteem in trainees.
- To improve human relations through achieving interpersonal competence, internal commitment and the process of conformation.

Three serious questions arise about training which states its objectives in such terms:

1. What is the *behavioral* definition of such words as "authenticity," or "esteem." Aren't they so lacking in precision as to be unmeasurable?

2. Presuming they were precisely defined, and could be measured, would sensitivity lab training change them?

3. Presuming that the changes did occur what evidence exists that such a behavior change would be good for the man and the company?

Criteria No. 2

The course of change is comprised of some logical small steps in good training. In sensitivity training not only are the participants unaware of what the outcome will be, but in many instances, since there are no controls, neither are the trainers. In most labs, the coordination of what the respective trainers will do at what time is as vague at the middle and end as it was in the beginning. Typically the staff of a lab is assembled by mail or phone from the in-group which conducts such sessions. They agree to gather one day ahead of the arrival of the subjects to be trained. They divide up the chores under the direction of the assembler of the program. There is little chance for any detailed checking of objectives of individual sessions, or any careful plan-

ning so that progressive stages of training will occur. Accordingly most such sessions lack many of the elements of training which might change behavior, simply because they are so ineffectually run. If a general statement of objectives is made, it goes along the line of saying something like "open up their minds" or something equally vague. *How* open, or even what an open mind *is,* isn't defined.

If we analyze carefully the sessions which comprise the two- or three-week sensitivity training session we note that the objectives are often stated in such terminology as teaching the student "to recognize" . . . "to feel" . . . "to relate" . . . "to begin to understand" . . . "to gain self insight" . . . or "to become aware" or similar phrases. Little if any behavioral terminology is used to describe what the persons will do, do differently, or stop doing in terms of specific actions. Presumably these changes are in the smooth muscles of glands. There is little overt behavior prescribed, not even precise verbal behavior.

Emitted behavior of any specific definition in the laboratory setting is not clearly classified as being required for success, and the only reinforcements which shape behavior are those randomly provided by a group of unknown composition. (The major criteria for admission being that of being able to pay the registration fee. This builds in a reinforcement of middle-class values and little more.)

Value changes are not based upon careful analysis of the present values which are to be changed, nor even explicit statements of desired terminal values sought. Since value changes could only be measured by verbal or written behavior at the end of the course, and no such values are clearly defined the efforts at measuring behavior change runs into logical blocks. The few efforts at evaluation of behavior change from laboratories have not been clearly successful, and certainly are not wholly reliable.

Since success in the course is not clear, then the feedback of reinforcing evidence of achievement of intermediate steps in personal behavior change is impossible. Because the T-group is the major source of reinforcement, and their values are mixed, then the reinforcement of emitted behavior is just as likely to be for the wrong things as the right things.

Specific causes of changes unclear. More pointedly, there is no attempt to measure the relative effects of the different parts of the laboratory upon the learner. Are the T-Groups the crucial variable? How can we be sure the T-group hasn't changed the trainee in one direction, and the lectures in another? Where observation and anecdotal evidence points to behavior change after a lab how can we know which training method effected the change; the role playing (which has been proven to change behavior even outside laboratory groups) the informal bull sessions, or simply the opportunity to live in a closed community for two weeks with others? Do different T-Group leader personalities (or reputations) or marvelously skilled lectures such as Argyris delivers have differential effects in changing behavior? Since we can't prove behavior change anyhow, all of these are merely speculative questions.

Criteria No. 3

The learning is under control. The major reason that control is not present in sensitivity training is that it is based on creating stress situations for their own sake which may go out of control and often do. Here's what happened in one group:

Anecdote No. 3

"Explosions of angry disagreement were the order of the day. People turned on one member and evaluated him publicly, voicing open disapproval of him. Others wondered why they felt upset when their fellows began to get angry at each other, and tried to cut off the argument before they got it off their chest."[11]

Out of this the trainees are left to "discover for themselves" how this stress can be converted into such things as business meetings, conference leadership, coaching and counselling, and other useful business practices.[12] This transference is a mere detail it seems, which any person can do. This seems to be a very broad jump, and one which my training experience shows just doesn't take place.

And what if this transference *doesn't* take place?

Then the trainee has been through an emotional binge which has some totally unpredictable effects. The possibility that uncontrolled experience may be harmful is just as probable as it's being helpful. In any event it can hardly be called training.

The lack of control over learning in sensitivity labs is further evidenced by the lack of control in the exercises. This is coupled with *too much* control at other times. Add to this a lack of con-

trol over facilities management which could seriously affect the attitudes of registrants, and the end result is chaotic, planned and unplanned, but chaotic.

Ancedote No. 4

At Bethel in 1955 during one afternoon of gang-role-play, several of us who were stimulating vocational school teachers in a make-believe school system attempted to add reality to the exercise by forming an unauthorized but quite realistic teacher's union. Two immediate reactions followed. First the staff howled with dismay that this wasn't part of the exercise, and secondly, the whole session took on a touch of vitality as the industrial executive playing superintendent of schools started an energetic union-busting campaign. Finally after an unauthorized mass meeting on the lawn deciding whether or not we would strike the whole training lab we were politely requested by the trainers to break up our union because we were fouling up the whole exercise.

To be a truly controlled "laboratory" there would be more careful matching of room-mates, tight limitations on private liquor stores, closer attention to boy-girl relations, and careful attention to the internal management of such mundane matters as meals, lodging, visual aids, and reading inputs. Many of these are handled rather cavalierly in labs.

Criteria No. 4

There are selection standards for admission. The more serious defects of sensitivity training relate to admissions standards. The present condition is such that anybody with the registration fee can attend. He may already be

sensitive and aware, in fact may be too much so. You could make a good case that far too many of the people who are attracted to it are those who are emotionally high strung and overly sensitive. They will of course be admitted if they have the registration fee. There is no optimum level of sensitivity defined in such courses—merely that you will probably go away more sensitive than you came. How about the overprotected individual whose pressing need is that he toughen up a bit because he is already a mass of quivering ganglions, thinking and feeling on several levels of perception at the same time, and therefore totally incompetent at the world of business infighting. For this one the lab becomes a great psychological nudist camp in which he bares his pale sensitive soul to the hard-nosed autocratic ruffians in his T-group and gets roundly clobbered. He goes away with his sense of inferiority indelibly reinforced. The bullies, of course, have also reinforced their roughneck tendencies upon him. There are more J. Alfred Prufrocks who voluntarily enroll in sensitivity training than there are Babbitts or Cash McCalls.[13]

Anecdote No. 5

In one lab I attended one woman who never should have been admitted because of a prior mental breakdown "went berserk" (as a fellow T-group member described it) and was under psychiatric treatment until she returned home.

Anecdote No. 6

A large food firm directed 60 of its middle managers to attend a "Conference Leader Training Seminar." The actual but not stated intent was to conduct T-groups. A high official attended and noted individual behavior under stress. Several persons who "didn't measure up" had marks placed in their career folders.

Anecdote No. 7

A slick brochure advertising a "Leader Training" course drew several dozen enrollees to a course. Those coming found themselves in T-group training. Shaken badly, two left early, and another broke into tears several months later describing his public humiliation to an interviewer. His T-group had voted him "the worst leader they would like to work for." The specification of their charge? He was "too wishy washy." His job was procurement analyst and he was highly regarded by his superiors for his technical knowledge.

Anecdote No. 8

A large company established a lab as one of numerous training courses. Over several years the lab's reputation became a place where the "problem managers go to get straightened up." The staff attempted unsuccessfully to allay this fearful image. One successful and able manager was assigned to attend and immediately resigned to accept another job. A quick survey of the past enrollees showed that the terminations among this group was quadruple that of the company management as a whole. Others who graduated but didn't quit were extremely bitter about this singling out. Others were reported by their managers to have "gotten back on the track and are now doing top-flight jobs after the treatment."

Criteria No. 5

Evaluation of results. The most common result of taking sensitivity training is that the individual reports that "I really don't know what happened to me if anything but I feel that I have been through an experience." This perfectly accurate statement could be said of an individual who has visited a jail, an insane asylum of the older type, a home for blind children, or the emergency ward of the local hospital. Since the sensitivity trainers don't know what the goal of such training is, any road will get them there, and any outcome is exactly what can be expected. Small wonder nobody has yet done a rigorously executed evaluation of effect.

An experience it is, without doubt. Training, I'm afraid it is not, and the company that spends its cash on sending people to the more esoteric kinds is being unfair to their shareholders. No proof has been shown that it changes behavior on the job.

The escape which is often taken is that "we aren't really practicing therapy but are merely teaching group dynamics" and is easily said but the end effects prove otherwise. Couple this opportunity for playing God over managerial styles with hard-sell direct-mail advertising and you have the makings of a most harmful movement.

Group dynamics differs from sensitivity training. The process of group psychotherapy in sensitivity training is not very different from the study of group dynamics through action training and role playing. The use to which the process is put is entirely in the hands of the practitioner. In an attempt to achieve dramatic effects, and to bring about emotional stimulus which guarantees a sure-fire reaction from the customer, far too many of the sensitivity trainers are indeed playing God with their clients—in some cases without even realizing what a powerful instrument they are tinkering with.

Anecdote No. 9

One team of business school professors will take into any company a one-week sensitivity course which has as an integral part of its package a simulated phone call from the man's mistress, threatening revelation of everything to his wife. This comes in along with calls from customers threatening to cancel contracts and a simulated call from his wife announcing that their oldest child has cancer.

This is management training?

Adapting the processes of sensitivity training into sound training of managers in group processes isn't hard to do. The key ingredient is to identify some terminal behavior which we would like to see in the trainee. Among these are such group related matters as:

> How to lead problem-solving conferences.
>
> How to lead decision-making conferences.
>
> How to avoid being a blocker in conferences.
>
> How to elicit complete participation in meetings.
>
> How to identify and use the various roles of conference members.
>
> How to gain cooperation between competing groups.
>
> How to organize committees and conferences.

Such things might be taught—i.e., behavior change effected and perhaps

even measured. Yet these could be taught without a T-group.

One of the basic assumptions of laboratory training is that "value changes lead to behavior change, and never the reverse." This is only half true. Skill development leads to attitude and value change if practice of the newly acquired skill brings knowledge of success from parties whose approval is important.

Anecdote No. 10

Managers of a chemical company were (lecture) trained in techniques of political activity for managers by direction of their president. Many were hostile or indifferent to begin. As the course progressed they were required to meet with county and municipal officials and take part in civic affairs. They found that they could understand and question actions of officials intelligently. Over 30 are now serving actively in civic activity which they had not done before. Their indifference is now changed to zest and enthusiasm as they continue to see good effects in a better community and in personal satisfaction and success. "I used to be a political slob, but now I'm running for Democratic County Committee" one said.

Sensitivity Training and Business Objectives

The real flaw in sensitivity training is that it isn't consistent with business and the economic world we live in. We are trapped in our own standard of living. We may struggle through proofs that the new participative styles of management are more productive than autocratic styles, but then there crops up General Motors which is built upon tight technical organization and tight discipline, being the most successful corporation that ever existed.[14]

Business is primarily an economic institution into which the inputs are materials and supplies, labor, and beginning capital. Through the process of production we obtain outputs of goods and services and ending capital. The objective of this output is profit from which comes growth and survival of the firm, and brings about the end product of it all which is *consumption.*

Anecdote No. 11

Even the new utopians are caught in this trap. They are experts at consumption like the rest of us. I once heard of a study which proved that people don't work for money alone. I invited the researcher who had done the study to speak at a conference. I found that he wanted $500 to make the speech and when I sadly reported that we couldn't afford it, he wouldn't come. If you have tried to get a good human relations trainer for your company's training program these days, you know that the rates are from a minimum of $250 a day up to $750 (for the man whose researches prove more about the idealistic nature of man than the lower priced one.)

Survival of firms is serious business these days. Of the 4,500,000 companies in this country, the average length of life is seven years. 450,000 will go broke this year and another 375,000 will go inactive. Managers obviously need training in their jobs to help them and their firms survive. All too often they have learned their management by *imitation.* Behavioral science has much to offer in finding new and better ways

of managing. This could be greatly accelerated if the new utopians could become more objective in their science. The great difficulty isn't whether they are right or wrong in their assumptions about participative versus autocratic management, Theory X versus Theory Y, or liberty versus oppression. The point is that we can't trust them as being good scientists as long as every research proves *one position* to which our common experience tells us there are some startling exceptions that work even better.

Many businessmen know the true value of *situational thinking* in which you are sometimes autocratic or downright ruthless; coupled with other times when you are as gentle and refined as a doting mother with people's sensibilities, and whole range of actions in between.

> A form of management training which has good guys and bad guys arbitrarily built into it to fit a utopian ideal of panacean democracy is not safe for a business or any other form of administrative organization to experiment with.

> *Until the sensitivity trainers have come forth with a school which takes the overly sensitive man and toughens him up into a rough and ready model of man as well as the reverse, I can only suggest to businessmen that they avoid the entire cult.*

Back to the Drawing Board

The time has come I would suggest when the entire sensitivity training movement should be drawn back to the campus and overhauled by the more responsible behavioral scientists who started it all. My specific recommendations would be as follows:

1. A clearer distinction between group dynamics and group psychotherapy should be drawn in laboratory objectives.

2. People conducting group psychotherapy should be required to be certified and licensed by law, just as psychologists are now licensed or approved by professional bodies and by state law. The conduct of group psychotherapy without a license and appropriate professional qualifications should be outlawed.

3. Group dynamics for business is badly in need of more attention to the actual problems which administrators face in making their organization perform. Training procedures which identify desired terminal behavior, and have an orderly path toward it should be developed. This means that the group dynamics researchers must be supplemented by practical trainers who are fully aware of the training needs of administrators.

4. Concerted action by the responsible behavioral scientists to rout from their field the many fast-buck operators who are peddling the many weird variations of basic science by hard-sell direct mail advertising. The formation of an association of accredited firms and agencies for the conduct of group dynamics training comparable to the association of management consultants is badly needed.

Unless this takes place, and soon, the entire region of behavioral science will suffer badly. The responsibility for this action lies with the serious and able behavioral scientists who comprise the inner circle.

As an advisor to business I can only tell those with whom I talk, wait until

this reform is done before you turn any of your successful and mature managers loose in this barren steppe where the wolves lie in wait.

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10. For a typical report see: Maier, Norman, R. F. "An Experimental Test of the Effect of Training on Discussion Leadership," *Human Relations,* Vol. 6, No. 2, 1953, pp. 161-173.

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12. Tchirigi, Harvey D. "The Contribution of Stress to Sensitivity Training," *The Personnel Administrator,* Mar.-Apr. 1961, p. 44.

13. Prufrock is the principal figure in a poem by T. S. Eliot "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" from "POEMS 1909-1925," T. S. Eliot, Harcourt, Brace and Co. What makes Prufrock pathetic rather than comic is his awareness of his own frustrations, he's repelled by actuality yet longs for the things of the earth.

     No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
     Am an attendant lord, one that will do
     To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
     Advise the prince, no doubt an easy tool,
     Deferential, glad to be of use,
     Polite, cautious and meticulous
     Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse
     At times, indeed almost ridiculous
     Almost at times, the Fool

14. For two current researches which cast some doubts upon proof of the ill-effects of "close supervision" see:
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