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Issues

Tell Us What You Think

Our cover story this month touches on the expatriate experience for managers. Most of you are not sipping Pernod, saki, acquavit, or tequila while you read this, but many of you have practiced HRD in other countries, and we'd like to hear about your experiences. In what ways have you changed your approach to training, whether here or in a foreign country? What part of your foreign experience has been most important to you? What part of your American experience has been most important to you in another country? Has the nation's or the corporation's culture been the driving force in your training?

We'd like to hear your opinion on this or any other HRD issue. Send your views to "Issues," *Training & Development Journal*, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.

Celebrate!

Celebration is back, and we hope it is here to stay.

We work in an era of doing more with less, downsizing, and being lean and mean. In this strident environment, however, organizations do little to reward people for taking care of business. The push for excellence, customer commitment, controlling costs, and fending off takeover threats has taken the fun out of being a manager.

Managers today are harassed more than ever—they constantly hear "what have you done for me lately?" and "if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." They and their subordinates are expected to give blood, sweat, and tears as the price for survival. Where have

all the fun, excitement, good cheer, and positive feelings for the organization gone? Over the long haul, suffering is not a great experience. Celebration, on the other hand, is a simple way to revive and revitalize a hard-charging team as it completes its project.

Celebration has many advantages. It fulfills human needs, such as individual recognition, achievement, affiliation, and self-esteem. It creates a cohesive team. It provides a diversion and a release, giving us time to re-energize for the next pursuit. Last, it is a natural, human expression that builds respect among team members.

Our willingness to pause and enjoy hard-won victories seems to have four barriers.

■ *Urgency*. In our competitive age, a team achieves a goal, says a quick "we-did-it," and moves on to the next task. The treadmill keeps going.

■ *Jealousy*. Competition makes it difficult for us to acknowledge the achievements of others; each victory by someone else turns into a defeat for us.

■ *Perfection*. We think that there's always room for improvement and that unless something is perfect, there's no need to pat ourselves on the back.

■ *Praise impairment*. Managers are miserly with their compliments, so people are deprived of praise.

Here are some strategies that can help managers overcome those barriers and create a positive environment.

■ *Praise more often*. Find positive achievements and recognize the people responsible for them. For instance, start your staff meeting with a "positive stroke" session.

■ *Learn to accept praise gracefully*. When you receive a compliment, don't say, "Aw, shucks." Rather, smile and say, "Thank you," or even, "Yes, you are very perceptive."

■ *Create meaningful—but attainable—rewards*. Wouldn't it be nice if we all did well? It would be

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cause for celebration.

■ *Celebrate the families who accommodate work needs.* Invite them to training programs, retreats, dinners. That gives meaning to "we're one big, happy family here."

After all the blood and sweat, it's time for some cheers!

Ken Matejka

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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

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It's Simple

What follows is strictly my experientially-based opinion.

I consider it easy to approach training needs assessment/analysis (TNA/A) from a bare-bones point of view: you simply use a system that identifies what exists and what doesn't and then reports on the difference.

What's all the uproar? What do you mean, "That's simplistic?" Back in the old days, when instructional systems development was new and experiments in training methodologies ran rampant, this was the alpha and omega:

■ What does the student have?

■ What do we want him or her to have?

■ How do we accomplish the change?

You may remember that along with the development of instructional programming came the concept of pre-testing, with the premise that if the student already knew it, there was no reason to teach it. Formal classroom curricula, allotment of time, sequencing of input, measurement of attainment, scheduling students, scheduling instructors, and monitoring progress were all viable factors in the design and administra-

tion of ISD—the focus was TNA/A.

What's happened since then? We found more effective, more efficient methods of reaching our goals. Along the way we discovered more considerations for TNA/A. We found that everyone had different concepts of training; therefore, we had to define the term. Then we had to convince our audience that TNA/A applied not only to training but to other ways of reaching our goal—to get where we wanted to be, to find out what was needed, and to provide what was needed by restructuring, reprogramming, changing procedures, firing, hiring, eliminating/manipulating/creating, and maybe (heaven forbid) changing the goal.

We also discovered that everyone didn't buy into the goal, let alone the system. Engineers, accountants, and word-processors didn't share the same skill requirements. Assessment Clerk A knew some things that Assessment Clerk B did not, and vice versa. Heavy-Duty-Equipment Operator X wanted to learn to drive bigger machinery, but did that represent a "need"? Did quality-control experts "need" more knowledge and statistics? It is difficult to reconcile position-classification specifications with what actually is being done, with the perceptions of the employee and the employee's supervisor of what should be done, and with the implications of minimal acceptable performance and the actualities of the power structure—not to mention with operational budget, priorities, and workload.

You'll find all sorts of mini- and micro-systems that will help your assessments. You can research and network and experiment, but I think that the simple approach to TNA/A is a good one: find out what the boss wants and then produce it in a professional and objective manner.

Bert E. Happ

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The End

Last year's plant-closing bill requires companies to notify employees 60 days in advance of a plant closing (with certain exemptions). The question now facing management is how to plan for an imminent closing or layoff.

We've studied various aspects of organizational death—how an organization closes down—and believe that because organizational death is a fact of corporate life, organizations ought to prepare for it. The death is a traumatic experience for the organization's employees—its soul—who will have to make major changes in their lives. One way to soothe shut-down sorrows is to implement the Charon Response.

Just as Charon transported ancient Greek souls across the River Styx to Hades, a "boatman" needs to assist displaced workers in making the transition from a dying organization to new surroundings and new employment.

The Charon Response is a dedicated effort by the company, the union (or a group representing the employees), and the community (including local, state, and federal agencies) to alleviate suffering experienced by displaced employees. The Charon Response will work only if those organizations work together.

First, a respected "initiator" must emerge from the community and assemble a task force from the parties involved in the closing.

Second, a formal "authority" must take responsibility for leading the task-force members and for reconciling the inevitable conflicting agendas and turf battles between the parties. The object is to assist displaced employees, not to advance one's own agenda.

And, as ancient Greek souls needed a coin to pay Charon to take them across the River Styx, the Charon Response needs funding to coordinate counseling, retraining,

and outplacement services. Last year's legislation provides funds for retraining programs and seems to us more efficient than scratching for funds from many sources with myriad conditions.

Making a Charon Response to an organizational death is the humane thing to do. While it helps the displaced workers, it also provides a stabilizing effect for the organization during the closing process—if the closing is implemented well, the plant might run efficiently until its last day.

We believe that the Charon response will benefit society as a whole. If our society is indeed a society of organizations, then we wonder what kind of spirit those organizations will have in the future if their employees—their actual spirit—have been ill-treated in previous organizations. Is it not possible, after thousands of organizational deaths in the next 20 years, that millions of haunted spirits will make up the organizations that constitute our society? We should try to avoid that possibility.

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(Editor's note: For more on plant closings and layoffs, see this month's "Four by Four.")

Mandate Education, Not English

While U.S. corporations allocate billions of dollars to provide basic-skills training to American employees, some xenophobes want a constitutional amendment that requires all U.S. residents to develop English

skills. Can their solution be so simple?

Right now, 17 states have passed initiatives to make English their "official" language. U.S. English, the controversial lobbying group behind the movement, wants to make a constitutional amendment. The average citizen probably considers such an amendment a harmless affirmation of our national status quo. But there are deeper implications.

Supporters of the amendment claim that it would force people to function successfully in English. But do they need to be forced? Everyone realizes that weak English skills are a major handicap for job applicants in the United States. And in the United States and the rest of the world, English functions as an instrument of economic and social opportunity.

Unfortunately, the United States does not meet the current demand for English classes. Just look at the waiting list for ESL classes that are conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics: in Los Angeles, 40,000 people were turned away last year; in New York, 6,000; in Boston, 15,000; and in Houston, estimates are as high as 50,000.

The real crisis is in education, not political philosophy—the sink-or-swim approach is not a magical substitute for aptitude, effective learning techniques, and time. The crisis affects the future of our workforce, because it currently affects the nearly 2.7 million non-native American youth—6 percent of the national school enrollment. Currently, 40 percent of Hispanic students drop out of high school—simply because they don't understand what is being taught.

To develop the literacy skills of the future workforce, a 1988 study, "New Voices: Immigrant Students in the U.S. Public Schools," recommends transitional bilingual and multicultural programs—proven programs the proposed amendment would eliminate.

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The people behind the proposed amendment have made language skills a political debate rather than a vital economic issue. In a country where more than 27 million adults are functionally illiterate, the problem of limited English proficiency is just one narrow aspect of the critical skills shortage affecting our economy. And whether we're talking about literacy levels, the command of English by immigrants, or the native-born American's lack of foreign-language skills, the bottom line is that the United States is not investing enough in human resource development. The nation cannot remain competitive, at home or abroad, unless our workforce is prepared to handle sophisticated tasks. Employees cannot operate com-

puters if they cannot read, and U.S. corporations cannot penetrate overseas markets unless American employees have foreign-language skills.

Our Achilles' heel results from our haphazard approach to education, not the inadequacies of our Constitution. If we continue the misguided political debate, we will be ignoring the underlying crisis.

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"Issues" is compiled and edited by Eric R. Blume. Send your viewpoints to: Issues, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.

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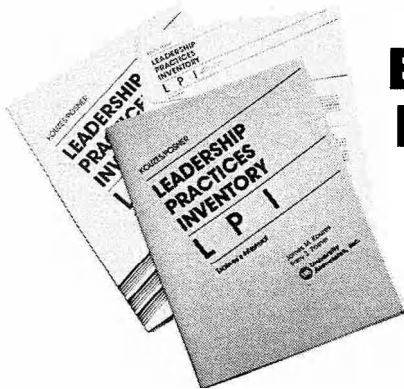
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