SENSITIVITY TRAINING: SHOULD WE USE IT?

Many managers would agree that the effectiveness of their organizations would be at least doubled if they could discover how to tap the unrealized potential present in their human resources.

The social sciences are a rich resource today for management even though they have not reached full maturity.

–DOUGLAS McGREGOR
in **The Human Side of Enterprise**

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One of the more controversial means of human resource development that the social sciences have proffered to professional managers is sensitivity (or laboratory) training, with its T-Group technique. Among the claims made for such training are that it achieves authenticity in interpersonal relations, unfreezes managers' minds, develops self-esteem, and improves human relations "through achieving interpersonal competence, internal commitment and the process of conformation"[1] -- a virtual panegyric that makes sensitivity training sound like a managerial lodestone that should be in the widest use. That it is not, and that it is indeed as hotly attacked as defended, makes it a very fit subject for examination by students of management.

The examination here shall be from a practical point of view. This approach is taken because – whatever a manager's academic or theoretical background – he must be pragmatic in daily business affairs. Thus the objectives of this article are to aid the reader to determine for himself (a) whether sensitivity training is – to borrow another phrase from the late Professor McGregor – merely another "success of the outright charlatan in peddling managerial patent medicines"[2] or if it does merit inclusion in the professional manager's pharmacopoeia, (b) under what circumstances to use sensitivity training, and (c) how to implement a positive decision.

IS IT EFFECTIVE?

A helpful guide in assessing the worth of sensitivity training is Professor George S. Odiorne, who, while director of the University of Michigan's Bureau of Industrial Relations, spoke critically of sensitivity training at a conference on management development.[3] Although some of his substantiating arguments may be considered to have been rebutted successfully by Professor Argyris,[4] there remains a very useful outline in the form of criteria generally associated with good training. Professor Odiorne lists five such criteria.

The first is that "the desired terminal behavior can be identified before the training begins." Professor Odiorne goes on to ask these questions apropos of sensitivity training:

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?

These are good questions for the practical manager to ask; and the last is a key question, most especially the second part of it. What *is* the evidence that laboratory training will benefit the individual and his organization by effecting desired behavioral changes in a person? The answer is disheartening. The writer, while not claiming to have made an exhaustive search, did seek such evidence in particular, and was only partially rewarded: There is evidence that sensitivity training modifies interpersonal behavior, and even some evidence that such changes are personally beneficial, but no evidence of the *organizational* efficacy of sensitivity training was found. We shall return to this point later, when we consider the organizational value of the method. For now it suffices to question the practicality of identifying the desired results in advance of training.

NO PRE-PLANNING

The second of Odiorne's criteria is that "the course of change [in good training] is comprised of small logical steps." This seems a curious criterion to apply to a training process which has as its aim the change, not of the intellect, but of the psychology, or at least of its behavioral manifestations. But a reading of what Odiorne subsequently says shows the criterion to be unfortunately phrased rather than wholly inappropriate.

What Odiorne objects to under this heading is the absence in laboratory training of what elsewhere would be termed "lesson planning" and the lack of definitions of student progress and success. Now it is truly hard to see how lesson planning could be adopted while retaining the free-wheeling nature of the T-Group that is "the core of most laboratories."[5]

For Odiorne to ask thus appears to betray a lack of comprehension of the essential nature of the T-Group, but it is his finesse of expression that is deficient, not his comprehension of the subject. Stripped of excess indignation, Odiorne's statement is:

> There is little chance for any detailed checking of objectives of individual sessions, or any careful planning so that progressive stages of training will occur . . . Little if any behavioral terminology is used to describe what the persons will do, do differently, or stop doing in terms of specific actions . . . 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 . . . 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.[6]

And that is a major difficulty with sensitivity training. By not being amenable to pre-planning, and because the steps toward success in it (and the nature of that success itself) are not previously defined, its chances of inducing a desirable change are much reduced for lack of proper reinforcement of learning.

REINFORCEMENT AND SEQUENCE

While little is known of the essential psychological and biochemical nature of the learning process, a few empirically derived guides are avilable, prominent among which is the value of reinforcement in such forms as encouragement, praise, reward, and repetition. Another such principle (which likewise is being incorporated in the design of modern teaching machines) is the presentation of material, including concepts, in logically arranged steps, rather than in one indigestible whole. Both of these principles are longstanding and well-tested – and both are in practice dismissed by the advocates of T-Group training *without the substitution of other principles that have similarly been justified by results.*[7]

This, then, is the gist of the criticism under Criterion No. 2: Few of us are able to leap directly to a desired end, be it intellectual or psychological; and if the path to the goal is not given illumination (by reinforcement) at critical steps, we are not likely to achieve it at all. Moreover, randomly provided reinforcement is worse than none. It is, therefore, proper to conclude that the techniques of T-Group training offer little likelihood of inducing a specific desired change in a given individual, although (as with genetic mutation) that change may occasionally occur, possibly with predictable regularity, in the affected population as a whole. For the manager seeking to solve a specific problem or improve a specific situation, this is a small hope.

LEARNING CONTROL

An evaluation of sensitivity training vis-a-vis the third criterion, that the learning is under control, might seem to be included within the foregoing discussion, but there is more involved than merely a lack of pre-planning and of selective in-training guidance. "The major reason that control is not present in sensitivity training is that [such training] is based on creating stress situation for their own sake which [situations] may go out of control and often do."[8] In encouraging candid feedback, there is a real danger of overstressing a thin-skinned, hypersensitive individual (more on this later), but beyond that, there may be excessive indulgence in the artificial creation of stress, as in this example:

> 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.[9]

Nor is it enough to question, as Odiorne does, the legitimacy of expecting such methods to produce a valid training result. The manager considering the use of sensitivity training should reflect on the fact that these acts, so like schoolboy pranks, were executed under the direction of "business school professors." If he does, he will see that sensitivity-training services may not be wisely engaged simply by seeking practitioners with impressive credentials. Instead, the "buyer" should thoroughly investigate what is offered. The time and effort to do so are a debit in the training ledger, but should they not be spent, there is a definite possibility that, at best, the trainee will regard with animosity or fear the official or organization that was responsible for subjecting him to such harassment. The worst possible outcomes of such stressful experience seem too terrible to contemplate, but they too may occur if adequate admissions standards are not enforced. The existence of such standards is Odiorne's fourth criterion of good training.

STRESS EFFECTS

It is obvious that the effects of stress vary with the capacities of the subjects, in this case the sensitivity trainees. Here again, the apparent credentials of the trainers offer no consistent guarantee, for ability to pay is often *the* admission standard. In his response to Odiorne's criticism, Professor Argyris, an associate in National Training Laboratories, cited statistics to show an incidence of psychotic breakdowns lower than the national norm, but he added that all of the four or so (in 10,000) trainees who "had psychotic episodes and become seriously ill" had previous psychiatric histories.[10] While the overall statistics may have been reassuring, the acceptance for training of people with histories of psychiatric aberrations is disturbing, and many lesser proclivities should

be barred by admissions standards. As Odiorne pungently phrased it,

> 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 . . . and therefore incompetent at . . . business in-fighting? 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.[11]

Once more, the practicing manager bears a responsibility for examining the preferred (or invited) training program, this time to assure himself of the adequacy of admissions standards or, worse yet, to supply them if they are lacking. This may prove to be no small task, and indeed may require the professional assistance of a staff or consulting psychiatrist. As with the examination of the training per se, the time and effort must be considered a surcharge.

IS IT PRODUCTIVE FOR THE ORGANIZATION?

If the effectiveness of sensitivity training is so questionable, why bother to inquire about its organizational productivity? For one reason, things often work despite our not knowing why they do, and for another, small differences can be quite important in a competitive situation. Odiorne rightly makes an evaluation of results his fifth criterion.

But, as was said before, this writer found no convincing evidence of the organizational efficacy of sensitivity training. And very recently, Leonard Ackerman, Associate Professor of Management at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, stated that he has "yet to see evidence that [sensitivity and sensitivity styled] programs result in more effective management behavior."[12] Now this does not prove the negative (i.e., that no such evidence exists), but if there is some, it is most curious that it is not conspicuously brandished by the proponents of sensitivity training, for this is precisely the best defense of the technique that could be made.

Ackerman also feels that it is questionable if self-knowledge is an appropriate goal for organizational training programs. "If the individual performs effectively in the organization, isn't this enough – at least as far as the organization is concerned?"[13]

IS IT DISRUPTIVE?

> Many of our attempts to control behavior, far from representing selective adaptations, are in direct violation of human nature. They consist in trying to make people behave as we wish without concern for natural law.[14]
>
> –DOUGLAS McGREGOR
> in **The Human Side of Enterprise**

Is sensitivity training counter-productive? Does it disrupt ongoing functions? That it can be is painfully clear from the experience of an engineering firm that subjected a group of its research executives to a poorly led session. "During one horrible weekend [the trainer] broke down the barriers of formal courtesy which had substituted quite successfully for human relations in this successful lab for many years." After returning to their work environment, the participants "began to engage in organized politicking to get square" and "senior scientists quit in droves."[15]

In this case, the attempted use of sensitivity training to improve relations had destroyed what Levinson's group, in its Menninger Foundation-sponsored study,[16] has termed "balanced psychological distance." This study identified three central concerns of employees:

> . . . interdependence with the company; the comfort of relationships with fellow employees, supervisors, and subordinates; and the experience of change, both in personal life and in the company.[17]

The middle of these three concerns is explained as being "the achievement of appropriate and psychologically rewarding relationships with other people, thus avoiding both inappropriate intimacy and chronic isolation."[18] The destruction of such comfortable relationships, as in the example cited, is very much to be avoided as injurious to the organization and possibly to the individuals. ". . . Because of the major psychological importance to him of the organization in which [an employee] works, he must perforce seek gratifying relationships in it."[19]

The disruptive aspects of T-Group training were also recognized by McGregor, who was impressed by the behavioral studies implications of T-Groups and the discovery by participants in them of the "tremendous gap between what passes for open communications in everyday organizational life and what is potentially achievable." Immediately after writing of that advantage, he added:

> One qualification is necessary at this point – one that applies widely. *Virtually every variable associated with human interaction may be "dysfunctional at both extremes."* . . . Even in the most intimate personal relationships – marriage, for example – *absolutely* open communications could destroy the relationship.[20]

It would seem, however, that this danger in sensitivity training could be much reduced by avoiding the mistakes made by the company in our example, namely allowing an inexperienced T-Group leader to meddle with its employees and letting them undergo this as a group. If an individual is to experience such "inappropriate intimacy," he should have an experienced trainer and the advantage of keeping his established on-the-job relationships secure – the latter also for the sake of his organization.

IS IT THE ONLY WAY?

Thus far in this examination, sensitivity training has scored poorly in terms of effectiveness, productivity, disruption potential, and required effort; but it might still be of interest if it were the only method that offered hope of advantage. Is it? As Miles and Porter ask, "Is it possible to achieve some of the benefits of group-training methods within the framework of the more direct, less time consuming, and usually less costly lecture and discussion techniques?"[21] Their own response is to describe in some detail a method of achieving just that.

Such approaches would seem to have a sound basis in psychological theory and

the experience of conventional teaching. Ordiorne, in challenging the assumption of laboratory trainers that "value changes lead to behavior change, and never the reverse," points out that "skill development leads to attitude and value change if practice of the newly acquired skill [brings recognition from] parties whose approval is important."[22] Many examples, ranging from child rearing to the post-war restructuring of Japanese society, are available to support this proposition. Sensitivity training has no monopoly on effecting either value or behavior changes.

THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

A number of guides for managers may be drawn from the preceding discussion.

1. Because sensitivity training is a high-cost, low-effectiveness method, other means of improving interpersonal relations should be given due consideration and perhaps tried first. Adjustment of the personnel structure and conventional training methods, while also costly, usually give greater assurance of results and involve smaller psychological risks. (It should be recognized, however, that not all problems of group relations in business and public administration are amenable to such treatment. One notable exception is police-ghetto relations, wherein sensitivity-style training offers considerable promise, partly because there is little downside risk insofar as disruption of existing relationships is concerned.)

2. Where sensitivity training is to be used, the service source should be carefully evaluated as to its methods, admissions standards, and, if possible, its record of achievement.

3. The selection of trainees should be carefully done. At least four factors should be considered:

a. "The [candidate's] willingness or ability to expose [his] personality to others."

b. "The degree of interpersonal effectiveness necessary for successful performance on the job."[23]

c. The candidate's present level of interpersonal expertise.

d. The likelihood of adverse psychological effects.

4. To minimize animosity toward the employing organization, a candidate should be acquainted with the nature of the proposed training and offered the options of declining it or withdrawing from it would jeopardizing his status.[24] The use of a form statement of election, like that suggested by O'Rourke,[25] is recommended; this improves the employer's situation with regard to such criticism as may arise out of a crossing by the trainer of the thin line between training and therapy,[26] or out of a feeling that individual privacy has been invaded by the employer's agents, a matter of increasing concern in many quarters.[27]

5. If at all possible, sensitivity trainees should not undergo the experience in the company of their normal work group, for the reasons discussed earlier.

REFERENCES

1. George S. Odiorne, "The Trouble with Sensitivity Training," *Training Directors Journal,* Oct. 1963, p. 13.
2. Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise,* McGraw-Hill, 1960, p. 4. The quotations at the head of this article also are from this work, pp. 4 and 5, respectively.
3. Odiorne, *op. cit.,* pp. 12-20.
4. Chris Argyris, "In Defense of Laboratory Education," *Training Directors Journal,* Oct. 1963, pp. 21-32.
5. Chris Argyris, "A Brief Description of Laboratory Education," *Training Directors Journal,* Oct. 1963, pp. 5-8. In this article, Prof. Argyris describes the T-Group as follows: "... Basically it is a group experience designed to provide maximum possible opportunity for the individuals to expose their behavior, give and receive feedback, experiment with new behavior, and develop everlasting awareness and acceptance of self and others." He continues by quoting Mouton and Blake: "The ... group is composed of 8 to 12 members, whose explicit goal is to study their own interactions as a group. No leader or power structure is provided. No rules or procedures are given to structure interaction. No task, topic or agenda for discussion is inserted to serve as a guide for action."
6. Odiorne; *op. cit.,* pp. 13-14.
7. It is appropriate to recall here McGregor's statement (*op. cit.,* p. 11) that "Human behavior is predictable, but, as in physical science, accurate prediction hinges on the correctness of underlying theoretical assumptions."
8. Odiorne, *op. cit.,* p. 15.
9. *Ibid.,* p. 17.
10. Chris Argyris, "In Defense of Laboratory Training," p. 22.
11. Odiorne, *op. cit.,* p. 16.
12. Leonard Ackerman, "Training Programs: Goals, Means and Evaluation," *Personnel Journal,* Oct. 1968, p. 726.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Page 9.
15. Odiorne, *op. cit.,* p. 12.
16. H. Levinson, *et. al., Men, Management, and Mental Health,* Harvard University Press, 1963, 205 pp.
17. *Ibid.,* p. 19.
18. *Ibid.,* p. 38. See page 79 of this work for an amusing analogy that is quoted from Schopenhauer by way of Freud.
19. *Ibid.,* p. 65.
20. Douglas McGregor, *The Professional Manager,* McGraw-Hill, 1967, pp. 162-163. See also p. 60.
21. Raymond E. Miles and Lyman W. Porter, "Leadership Training – Back to the Classroom?", *Personnel,* Jul.-Aug. 1966, p. 27.
22. Odiorne, *op. cit.,* p. 18.
23. The first two factors are from William F. Glueck, "Reflections on a T-Group Experience," *Personnel Journal,* July, 1968, p. 504.
24. Ackerman, *op. cit.*
25. Paul O'Rourke, "Should Laboratory Training Be Elective?", *Training and Development Journal,* Dec. 1968, pp. 38-39.
26. Boris Gertz, "Trainer Role Versus Therapist Role," *Human Relations Training News,* Vol. XI, No. 3 (1967), pp. 6-7
27. Vance Packard, *The Naked Society,* D. McKay Co., 1964.