

MINORITY GROUP TRAINING IN SMALLER COMPANIES

*a successful program at
Omaha Public Power District*

Many of America's education and training directors are today squared off face-to-face with the toughest opponent they've ever come up against — the heavyweight problem of fitting thousands upon thousands of unlearned, untrained and often unmotivated minority group members into the nation's business and industry.

The opponent's right there in the opposite corner, won't leave the ring, and becomes more formidable from day to day.

... And the training director has nowhere to hide and can't very well jump over the ropes, head for the dressing room ... and call the whole thing off. He can't abdicate because it's one of his jobs to help turn unproductive people into productive people. ... And he's finding that the rules of the choice and selection and the training of the cream of the crop no longer apply in all cases. And the task can appear awesome indeed unless viewed in the proper perspective.

No doubt, many of today's training directors shake and shudder when they actually think of the role they know they must play in completing the work of educating and training 500,000 minority group members by June 1971.

SMALL COMPANY PROBLEMS

Many are already involved and doing excellent jobs; but many more (especially those in smaller organizations) are not fully prepared and know that the day of reckoning gets nearer ... and they feel inadequate when confronted with the uncharted task.

Though the biggest portion of the job rests with the industrial giants such as Ford and Eastman Kodak, etc., located in America's metropolitan areas, there's a task to be done also in hundreds of smaller firms, especially in the urban areas. And such organizations usually have very small staffs for coping with their share of the massive program.

One such organization — the Omaha Public Power District — an electric utility of 1350 employees in Omaha,

Nebraska is using its own money, initiative and "know-how" to conduct a successful education-training program which, as of mid-summer 1968 still had 70 per cent of its enrollees at work after more than three months on the job.

Current goals of the program are to provide the equivalency of an eighth grade education and permanent full-time jobs to nine undereducated, under-trained Negroes. Ages range from 26 to 43 years; education from first grade on up into first years of high school.

THE PROGRAM

Enrollees go to school one-half day; spend the balance of the day at on-the-job training working with regular employees.

Subjects taught: English, reading, grammar, writing, mathematics, spelling, geography, attitudes, basic science. On-the-job training is taking place in Line and Substation Departments, Machine Shop, Production Division Maintenance, Stores and Display. No enrollee is assigned specifically to janitorial duties, as the program aims to train for skilled jobs (the highest the enrollee can be trained to perform).

Work and study rules are strict. Unexcused tardiness and absences are not tolerated. Discipline is straight-laced and effective.

Success of the program to date can be attributed to research, advance planning, some creative thinking, full support of management, and the intelligent use of facilities and talents at hand.

The Omaha Public Power District was aided by two other organizations in formulating and conducting the program.

Enrollees were secured through the Nebraska State Employment Service. Though thoroughly investigated before placed in the class, the enrollees were not hand-picked. Police records and such did not exclude applicants. Though the District's program is the first such in the area, applicants were not easy to find despite the fact that Omaha has

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between 38,000 to 40,000 Negroes living within its corporate limits. They make up more than 10 per cent of the city's population of 381,000.

NEGRO INSTRUCTOR

Classes, which run from 8 to 11:30 a.m., Monday through Friday, are taught by a Negro instructor, who is an employee of the Adult Education Division of the Omaha Public School System and a certified teacher. Salary of the instructor is paid through Omaha Public Schools, which also furnishes books and classroom materials. All other costs are paid by the utility. This makes for freedom of operation and independence.

Enrollees know they can be dropped at any time. They also know they are not involved in any sort of give-away program and that they must perform or be eliminated.

Enrollees are also well aware of the fact that if they complete the program satisfactorily they have a full-time permanent job with the Omaha-based utility. And they also know that the job they will have will be as skilled a job as they are able to qualify for during their working career. Classwork and on-the-job training efforts are closely observed and recorded.

Enrollees enter the program at \$1.75 an hour. They are paid for both class and work time . . . 40 hours a week. A merit system is employed for motivation purposes. At the end of three months, pay goes to \$1.85 an hour; at the end of six months it is upped to \$2.00. If the enrollee completes the program satisfactorily (passes the eighth grade examination, if at all possible, and works out well on his on-the-job training) he is offered full-time employment at the regular starting wage of the job to which he is assigned. After serving as a probationary employee for six months, he can become a permanent employee with all benefits.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Why is the program succeeding? How can grown men, most with families,

whose age averages 34 years and whose education level was about the fifth grade at the time the project began, be kept in class and on the job under strict discipline (at a starting rate of but a little above the minimum wage)?

The answer, according to those responsible for the program, is tied up in the five following components.

1. There is a permanent job at a good wage waiting for those who successfully complete the program;
2. The instructor is completely dedicated to the task, and being a Negro himself, knows how to work with the group;
3. Unlimited time and effort is devoted to the class and its individual members by the training director;
4. An esprit de corps has been built up among individual members of the group; each wants the rest to succeed as well as himself;
5. Key people throughout the organization were briefed on the program and understood its objectives before the project began. Result: better acceptance of the trainees and the program itself.

PROGRAM COSTS

Cost of the program is not prohibitive to OPPD, regardless of the fact that the utility is not involved with the use of Federal funds. The enrollee does do a certain amount of productive labor while he is learning the job even though he is in training. So, the only fully unproductive costs are those connected with classroom time, transportation time to on-the-job training sites, and administration.

Original budget was set up for a program of one year. Today, after more than three months, the program is well within the pre-planned costs.

Classes are held in an unused meeting room in a power station. This is off the beaten path, quiet and with ample facilities and accommodations. Tables and chairs, set at angles, help create an atmosphere of informality and encourage participation. Visual aids, such as

blackboard, charts, movie projector and tape recorder are employed by the instructor.

The Omaha electric utility's program will continue until the entire group of enrollees has completed study to eighth grade equivalency (or the highest possible for them to attain) and been placed on regular jobs within the organization. Many of the rules and plans have evolved as the program progressed. Not enough was known in the beginning to outline procedures for every move that was to follow.

HUMAN FACTORS

Enrollees were given physical examinations but not tested before they entered the program. If there had been pre-employment tests, there would have been no program, because the applicants could not have passed such tests. For example, one enrollee went for the first three weeks without participating in class discussions. He said he needed glasses. Real reason for his silence was his inability to read. Yet this man, 38 years old, is now learning to read and write and has an excellent on-the-job record and a wonderful attitude. He will not be able to pass the eighth grade examination before the program is completed, but he is being brought out of the dark dead world of illiteracy into a new land of letters, sights, sounds, word recognition and meaning. And he is experiencing steady employment that he can build into a life's work at a good salary.

As enthusiasm among the trainees mounts, they have helped each other . . . and the six-foot three-inch man finds help, and perhaps some excitement, in completing a simple sentence or coming up with the right answer for a common arithmetic problem.

The Omaha utility's minority program has been an effective exercise in planning and implementing a training program from scratch. Management was for it from the beginning but needed a workable, realistic plan on which to pass judgment.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

First, the program requirements were determined and the objectives stated. This research made the presentation of the project to management easy. The original proposal to management included the budget for the project (along with number of men to be trained). A running start was not possible, but the training director knew his objectives; had management approval; and the money for the project.

Length of the program was undeterminable initially because neither research or experience could predict speed of learning in the classroom and on the job.

Next step involved securing a capable instructor. The Adult Education Division of the Omaha Public School System came up with an excellent choice. Location of training quarters and equipment came next. The site finally selected was the third evaluated.

Students now had to be secured. Through the cooperation of the OPPD Employment supervisor, in-depth interviews were made with each applicant that had been secured through the

efforts of the State Employment Service. Selection was made after police and credit checks had been completed. After sizing up those chosen, a preliminary judgment had to be made as to where each man could fit best into available job situations. "Negotiations" now began between the training director and heads of the divisions in which it was hoped the enrollees could be placed. Little difficulty was experienced here as division heads had been briefed on the program and knew the program had top management approval.

Not much was left to be done at this stage except to start the classes every morning and get the trainees on the job each afternoon.

Three men were lost from the program over the first three months. One was put in jail; one went AWOL; another quit to find higher pay. Two qualified replacements have been found. The program is now operating at one less than capacity. It is not planned to handle others who want to enroll at present as the original group is too far advanced, but the District plans to train additional minority group people as a part of its coopera-

tion with the National Alliance of Businessmen (NAB) program.

A MANAGEABLE TASK

A training director can be floored when he pictures his share of the work in the training of 500,000 "rejected" Americans. He reads of the 50-city drive to put 100,000 "unemployables" to work by 1969 and 500,000 to work by June, 1971 . . . and then looks out the window and wonders if his old teaching job at Curlew High is still open.

He needn't let the task get his goat though if he does his thinking on the local level with figures and numbers and plans that are realistic to his organization, his budget and his community. Programs can be tailored to meet all needs and conditions. Government help can be available.

Such local, small scale training programs will work, as the program is working at the Omaha Public Power District, providing the stated objective is backed up by full management support, proper program planning, good instruction, a little creativity, and a lot of common-sense, tolerance and patience.

WHITE COLLAR UNIONIZATION IS SLOWER

While the momentum of union organizing efforts that peaked last year has carried over into 1968, a tabulation and analysis of National Labor Relations Board election figures for the first half of 1968 by White Collar Report, a labor relations information service of The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc., indicates that the unions' efforts are meeting with less success.

The Board certified the results of 416 elections in previously unorganized white collar units during the first six months of 1968. Unions won 235 elections in bargaining units comprising 5,450 clerical, technical, professional, and other white collar employees, and were defeated in 181 elections in which 7,470 employees were eligible to vote.

Comparable figures for the entire 12 months of 1967 were: 868 elections; 567 union victories in units of 15,090 employees; 301 defeats in units of 11,950 employees.

The number of elections is running about the same as last year, but the size of the voting units has dropped — from an average 40.3 in 1967 to 31 in the first half of 1968. More significantly, the proportion of union victories also is lower. While unions won almost two thirds of the 1967 elections and obtained bargaining rights for 58 percent of the employees voting on the union question, the percentages dropped to 56 percent of the elections and 42 percent of the eligible employees in the first half of 1968.