speaking from experience...

"Elementary, My Dear Watson"

By JOHN C. CRYSTAL

The amiable Dr. Watson accompanied Sherlock Holmes through every step of his investigations. Each saw and heard precisely the same evidence. Watson drew conclusion after conclusion...all wrong. He remained baffled until the very end when Holmes kindly explained what should have been obvious from the start. The secret of Sherlock Holmes? Being smart enough to ask the right questions and accept the obvious answers.

Tod White performed a service for all of us in the broad field of human development in his article reminding us of the obvious ("Address the Right Issues!" *Training and Development Journal*, May 1981). As Erich Maria Rilke observed: "True wisdom lies not in knowing all the right answers but in knowing the correct questions."

As White points out, the "people business" is hot today. Top managers are finally beginning to believe their own rhetoric about the success of their organizations depending upon their people. We all know that our own "road to fame" lies in meeting the needs of top management. White took the elementary step of asking them what they wanted from us as "people professionals."

The managers' responses are neither new nor surprising. Of course they need all the help they can get in identifying and developing the next generation of managers, increasing productivity, complying intelligently with EEO and other regulations, finding innovative compensation designs, motivating key personnel, helping individuals to accept responsibility for managing their own career development and arranging their own job satisfaction, establishing the maximum possible congruency between corporate goals and the individual goals of all levels of managers in particular, etc.

The HRD field is filled with people who claim to have been addressing these very issues for years. Limited progress appears to have been made in some areas. Yet, top management in general is still asking the same questions and is still quite skeptical of our abilities to meet their needs. Why?

Again, we all know that whatever approaches we advocate to any of these issues, we must have the support of top management if they are to succeed. Most of us seem to find it exceedingly difficult to develop such support. It does no good to accuse the CEO of being insensitive to the human aspects of the institution. Perhaps we are not communicating clearly in the CEO's language. Worse, perhaps we are unable to answer the ultimate bottom-line question: Does what we are advocating work?

Many of the nostrums prescribed by earlier practitioners simply have not worked well enough to be retained as continuing investments, or they have not worked at all! White offers us some useful clues excerpted here out of context: "Our responsibility includes—addressing the issues as defined by individuals...motivation and job satisfaction are very personal matters...the organization's need...and the individual's needs...sometimes these objectives are in conflict...we also know that most people don't know what their personal criteria are...any human resource activity which does not provide payoff for both the organization and the individual is doomed to failure."

This suggests the need for a more equitable balancing of the needs of both parties. Defining the organization's basic needs is relatively simple although ensuring that overall corporate goals are relayed accurately downward through many hierarchical layers often presents a problem.

However, if individuals cannot define the issues clearly and do not even know what their personal criteria are, they can hardly be expected to contribute to the success of any program dependent upon input from both sides. I know of only one way to close this gap: teach the individual how to conduct her or his own self-assessment and how to clearly define her or his own job, career and life objectives and goals *before* participating in a joint employer-employee planning process!

The failure to devote adequate attention to the individual's side of this equation has been the basic flaw in almost all corporate training and development programs. For example, one major bank went to considerable effort and expense to "sensitize" its managers to employee needs and aspirations with the aim of enlisting their willing, informed cooperation in ensuring better distribution of talent already on board. The project flopped when the newly trained managers began asking employees where

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and how they thought they could be most productive and best satisfied in the future. They discovered that practically none of those questioned knew how to respond in any realistic, informed way.

Officials from a leading international petroleum company realized they were not using the wealth of human talent optimally over the long run because of uncertainty over how to transfer key achievers from one department to another for best growth advantage—for both the corporation and the individuals. There was also a matter of providing flexibility in compensation for outstanding personnel facing "dead ends" in smaller departments. Like the bank's senior managers, they were trained and encouraged to ask employees selected for the "fast track" for their input. Again, very few could offer useful answers.

Very few of these intelligent, highly educated and productive "stars" had the faintest idea of how to go about making any informed, realistic plans for their own careers, even within the structure of their present institution. Yet, this petroleum corporation's personnel policy manual states: "The responsibility for individual career planning and management lies with the individual employee."

One of the major issues of the 1980s is to help employees accept responsibility for their own career development and job satisfaction. But, obviously, until someone teaches them how to do it for and by themselves, merely enhancing communications between them and their managers will remain a one-way communications channel.

Does it work?

Motivation is clearly a key factor in any attempt to improve productivity. So, as professionals, we ask ourselves how we can go about instilling motivation in others. All kinds of approaches have been tried. Higher paychecks, psychological testing, job enrichment, career-path planning, in-house career-management pro-

grams, pep talks, the threat of firing, etc. The results have not been overwhelming. Could we have been asking the wrong question again?

An article reflecting on some of the experiences of training and development practitioners in *Management Practice* (Spring 1977), points out the obvious in referring to all such efforts to motivate others.

"Their basic failing is that they try to motivate individuals. And individuals have to motivate themselves. The best an outsider can do is remove impediments. Chief among these impediments is the misalignment between corporate and individual goals."

Many chief executives have perceived the need to align corporate and individual purposes, but the prospect of doing so is enough to appall the best of them. The fact is, a congruence of purpose between company and individual is impossible to force from the company side, from the top. Personal motives and inclinations are simply too numerous, diverse and complex for a company to synthesize at the top levels, pass down the word and thus resolve all discrepancies.

What is the alternative? Change must come from the "bottom" up—beginning with the individual learning to assume responsibility for his or her own life. That is, he or she must choose what he or she wants to do, communicate it to his or her organization, press for the chance to do it and—if he or she doesn't get that chance—move to a situation where he or she does.

Strong medicine? Indeed... challenging all kinds of assumptions. Yet, when you think about it, it's obvious! And, when you think about it again, maybe we have a clue as to how to go about meeting not just one of top management's needs, but several—if it works, of course. Fortunately, it does work. I have seen thousands of individuals during the last 20 years bring just the sort of careful self-assessment required to the corporate planning table.

Now it is time to marry proven methods for giving individuals the capacity to carry out their end of the corporate bargain. Let's make the required dialogue *possible*. The object is to provide far greater congruency between individual and corporate goals. We need to use more sophisticated approaches to helping institutions clearly define their goals for the benefit of both parties. But, once more, an obvious question: are the corporate goals expressed by top management really fully understood and passed on without bias or distortion from one managerial level down to the next? To assure that dialogue between the individual and his or her closest manager occurs without static, we need to give attention to the quality of downward as well as upward communications.

Unfortunately, as recent studies and much casual observation suggest, messages from upper management levels are frequently, if innocently, distorted before they reach operating levels. When that happens, the desired end results cannot occur. Thus, simple yet sensitive and effective tools must be designed to ensure that all the desired interaction between institution and individual can take place without static or distortion. Some promising developments are now well under way for use in providing top management with real answers to the right questions and issues.

"Back to the basics" is a good axiom to apply once in a while, even though some of us may feel that asking a question such as, "Does it work?" is elementary. Some of us may also remember the lesson of Sherlock Holmes and accept the obvious in solving the human resource development mystery.