

T-GROUP LEARNINGS FOR GROUP EFFECTIVENESS

*using lab method for
"newer" values in
cohesive work groups*

Everyone who is concerned with effective group action, be he line manager, subordinate, trainer, or group dynamacist, is aware, to varying degrees, that group accomplishment depends on a multitude of factors. These include clarity of goals, past history (including success or non-success), cohesion, communication processes, atmosphere, leader and member skills, and the like.¹

One element in group success, which all too often is overlooked, is that of *participation*. That is to say, to what extent are all members of the group functioning as active rather than passive participants.

Groups in action in the work environment are typically task oriented. This is true whether we are talking about the work group in a planning or problem-solving situation, or in a staff meeting; or about task forces and special study groups; or about committees. In consequence, few groups attempt to assess the nature or extent of participation by group members, despite its potential for augmenting the effectiveness of the group.

LEARNINGS FROM THE T-GROUP

One way to zero in on the problem of member participation in groups is to draw upon the learnings which emerge from experience in the laboratory or sensitivity training situation (the T-Group). In the T-Group, since there is no formal or assigned task, the concern is solely with analysis of the ongoing behavior of the group. One aspect of this behavior is the issue of participation. Let's examine, then, some of the problems and characteristics of participation in the T-Group. Typically, at the outset, the more verbal or aggressive members of the T-Group promptly fill in the vacuum which has been created by the absence of an agenda, procedures, a formal leader, etc. The more reticent members react to the unstructured situation by withdrawal, i.e., by complete silence or limited participation at best.

TRAINER ROLE

In time, the trainer may intervene to raise questions about the behavior of the group. The trainer may comment on how (meaning) introductions by the participants were made, how the "agenda" was selected, how decisions, if any, were reached, or about the pattern of participation.² In respect to the latter factor he thus may observe: "We've been sitting here and talking for an hour and three members of our group of twelve haven't said anything; I wonder whether anyone feels that this is significant."

This intervention by the trainer may be met by stunned silence or, in short order, by defensive retorts. Some of these responses (by the more verbal ones, obviously) are of this nature:

- "Should everyone participate all the time?"
- "Why can't one participate by listening? The fact that John hasn't said anything doesn't mean that he's not learning from the discussions."
- "Should people participate just for the sake of participation?"
- "We're all big boys here. Why do we have to beg people to participate?"
- "Do you think we ought to embarrass people by calling on them?"

Although rationalizations such as the above are certain to come forth in the early life of the group, they are quite likely to be repeated and rephrased at various intervals thereafter. In fact, the issue of participation, along with other key issues such as the development of trust, the trainer's role, and the role of feedback may bug the group throughout its life. Some groups may grasp the importance of broad participation quite early; some may see its significance at mid-point in the program or thereafter; some may never overcome this barrier to group effectiveness.

TRAINER INPUTS REGARDING PARTICIPATION

As we have been indicating, the issue of participation is (or becomes) one of

JULIUS E. EITINGTON
*Chief Training Officer,
National Park Service,
Washington, D. C.
Former Editor of
Personnel Administration.*

vital concern to the T-Group. Obviously, each group will deal with it in different ways. Each trainer will also approach the problem in accordance with his own training style and philosophical base.

In any case, one or more of the following observations are quite likely to be advanced by the trainer and, hopefully, by other group members in support of the trainer in his quest for answers to the question: "Why participate?"

1. To tap the total resources of the group. One of the basic assumptions of group work is that higher quality solutions or decisions are possible through collective rather than unilateral action. Although we may know this in an intellectual sort of way, our behavior in groups all too often evidences that in a more practical sense we ignore this precept. In consequence, potentially valuable contributions by one or more group members are frequently lost.

However, early member rationalization of "participation for the sake of participation" generally loses its validity as the T-Group comes to realize that there are positive gains to be had by involving the total group in its activities. The author's experience in the T-Group, as well as in back-home work situations, is that it is very difficult for many group members to assume the "gate-keeping" role - e.g., "We haven't heard from John yet. I wonder how he feels about it?" Yet, the group's ability to do this is vital for its growth, cohesiveness and ultimate effectiveness.

2. To help growth of recessive members. To the extent that we conceive of a group at work *solely* as one which is concerned with its task, we lose the benefits of other values of group work. One allied purpose is to encourage the growth of *all* members of the group, particularly the shy ones. If the recessive members are not given ample opportunity to test their ideas in the market place, to comment on what is going on, we are systematic-



ADVANCED TRAINING IN SPECIALIZED TOPICS

In this fast moving world it is difficult for any firm to provide its management with advanced training that concerns the frontiers of new knowledge and industry needs. During the past 15 years The Industrial Management Center headed by James R. Bright has provided such specialized training for over 1,400 executives from leading firms and government agencies from 28 countries.

The following courses are available this June:

CAPITAL EXPENDITURE ANALYSIS

Basic Course and Advanced Seminar

June 1 - 7, 1969

Lake Placid Club, New York

TECHNOLOGICAL FORECASTING

June 8 - 12, 1969

Hilton Head Island, South Carolina

MATERIALS HANDLING MANAGEMENT

June 8 - 14, 1969

Lake Placid Club

PHYSICAL DISTRIBUTION & WAREHOUSING

June 15 - 21, 1969

Lake Placid Club

SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT

June 22 - 28, 1969

Lake Placid Club

For literature on courses, please write:

The INDUSTRIAL MANAGEMENT CENTER

June Program

Mrs. C. Neu, Registrar, Box 325, Weston, Mass. 02193

or telephone 617-444-4860

ally and selfishly depriving them of opportunities for growth. Participation is something like success, the more we get the more we seek. Similarly, non-participation breeds more of the same. The task for an effective group, then, is to break the cycle of non-participation (non-success) to one of participation (success).

A successful, hard-hitting group has to learn to make *all* group members feel wanted and to feel adequate. To do otherwise is to function in a self-serving, immature way.

3. To aid growth of the more verbal members. To the extent that the more talkative members can be encouraged to involve others in the discussions, they are learning and growing, too. What are they learning? They are learning, for one thing, the tough skill of *self-restraint*. That is to say, they are learning to give of themselves, to surrender their (large) share of the available air time to let a less aggressive person into the act. They thus are learning how to establish conditions so that others can grow; in short, *how to give help*. They certainly will learn the value of securing the ideas and contributions of others. They may also be learning how to listen. In general, these opportunities for growth by the total group will be lost to the extent that the aggressive members monopolize the air time to meet their own needs to be heard.

4. To get support for decisions. Although the T-Group is not a group which is concerned with the making of "vital" decisions involving program or money as in the back home situation, decision making opportunities do arise; e.g., in regard to choosing or not choosing a leader, agreeing on an agenda, securing consensus on procedures such as breaking for coffee, lunch or dinner, agreeing to participate in tasks or exercises proposed by the trainer, and the like. What emerges as an important learning, regardless of the nature or complexity of the decision, then, is the importance of *consensus*.

For it is consensus that secures commitment from the group to support a decision. Effective T-Groups learn in time that wide participation in the making of these decisions, no matter how small, is essential to group effectiveness. For if *all* group members are not heard, how can we be certain we really have consensus?

5. To ventilate and explore feelings. The back-home group at work in its problem-solving role is ordinarily concerned with facts, figures, logic, reason, and knowledge. It typically denies or smothers concern with feelings or emotions. For example, it is quite rare for a member of a back-home work group to say: "This discussion has me completely frustrated. I don't think we're getting anywhere because we've been skillfully dodging issues here." Yet this ventilation of feelings may be precisely what the group needs to get it into gear. Or a participant may be permitted to sit silently throughout the proceedings without anyone inviting him into the discussion. Or a group member may make a suggestion, possibly unpopular or seemingly bizarre, and the rest of the group may not respond at all ("a plop" occurs, as the group dynamics people call it), thus leaving the contributor with a high degree of confusion or resentment concerning the group's silent treatment of his contribution.

In the T-Group, by way of contrast, we turn things around and try to explore the *emotional* rather than the intellectual side of group effort. That is to say, we encourage all group members to verbalize their feelings, to comment about behavior - their own and that of others. To the extent that all T-Group members do this, we (the group) are better able to understand one another, to strengthen inter-personal relationships, to achieve greater satisfaction, and to progress more rapidly toward group goals.

By way of illustration, one aspect of the exploration of the feeling side of group life is to assure the group that

all its members are "with things," that they are not harboring "hidden agendas." Thus, after the group has been going for two or three days, a group member may say, "Hank, you've been silent most of this morning, how come?" Hank, of course, may be sulking, disinterested, fatigued, ill, experimenting, etc. But the group, to be effective, has the need to know *why* Hank is behaving this way. If the group doesn't smoke out Hank's feelings, particularly if they are of a frustrated or resentful sort, it can't do anything about them. Nor can it give Hank a chance to get them out of his system (catharsis).

Participation, then, is a means of liberating rather than bottling up the emotions. As necessary, it becomes a vital form of catharsis. To behave in any other way is to ignore the need that everyone has to express his feelings freely.

6. To build trust. One of the issues which an effective T-Group must be able to deal with is that of *trust*. Trust implies a freedom in the group for *all* participants to say what they wish (or need) to say, without fear of any *recriminatory* or *retaliating* action. In other words, how open is the group? Is it safe to speak out on a controversial topic? Is it safe to exhibit an emotion such as anger? Is it safe to give feedback to a group member or the trainer? Is it safe to question the validity of the whole T-Group concept?

Trust develops as group members become more open, more risk-taking, and more participative. Thus, the group member who sits back and smokes his pipe with a Buddha-like expression on his face not only inhibits his own learning, but is likely to inhibit the learning process for the entire group. Thus, a group member may get irritated with this taciturn behavior and say: "How come you're not in the ring with the rest of us? Do you think you're better than we are? How do we know what you're thinking if you just

sit there?" If the pipe-smoker recognizes the impact his behavior is making on the group and begins to participate, the group can get on with its business in the full sense of the term. The issue of trust, then, becomes (or is on the way to becoming) resolved.

7. **To build intimacy.** The T-Group also learns in time that the closer group members are to one another, the more meaningful and satisfying the experience becomes. But intimacy, like trust, is dependent upon participation. So if Joe isn't brought out of his shell by the group, i.e., if he is permitted to sit in silence, how can we get adequately close to him? And if we can't get close to him, how can we help his growth in any way? As one trainer put it, "You can't fix the engine if he won't even bring the car into the garage, let alone raise up the hood."

"Getting to know you, getting to feel free and easy" is more than just a line from a popular song. It is basic to success in interpersonal and group relations.

8. **To encourage risk-taking.** Managers who are familiar with the T-Group only through reading or secondhand accounts may have limited insight into its goals and values.

One value which is not commonly recognized is that of *risk-taking*. To the extent that group members can be encouraged to try new ways of behaving, to experiment, to take some risks, they are learning, as persons, to function in more complete and meaningful ways. Participation of a more active sort is one of the risks the quieter group member has to take if he is to learn and to grow. The fear of "making an ass of oneself," of being "clobbered" by a more outspoken member who may disagree, or of "not having anything worthwhile to say" has to be overcome. Overcoming this fear isn't a one-way street, of course. It has to be overcome through support by the entire group. Encouraging the quiet person to take the risk of partici-

pation is a challenge to the group; the more effective groups are able to rise to this challenge.

These, then, are eight notions about participation, and are some of the reasons which the trainer or T-Group members may advance to encourage the fullest possible group participation. They may (possibly) appear quite "logical" to the reader. Yet, for a T-Group in action, the logic takes on meaning only by actually working these problems through. For the barriers to participation are not in the realm of logic, but in the area of feeling or emotion. And emotional learning is a slow, frustrating, painful, and uncertain process.

APPLICATIONS TO THE ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING

The T-Group, as a unique, free-wheeling institution for purposes of individual and group development, obviously is not a model for group action in the plant or office. Yet, it can be a useful source to discover management learnings which have on-the-job applicability. Some of the learnings are:

1. Work groups all too often handicap themselves because they discourage openness, leveling, and full participation of its members. In fact, limited rather than full participation is generally the norm.³

2. Most work groups reduce their effectiveness because they deny group members the opportunity to participate freely, if at all, in the area of expression of feelings. Yet feelings may be as vital to the decision-making process as facts.⁴

3. Most work groups are content to live with hidden agendas which serve to support attitudes hostile to full participation.⁵ Some of these unstated attitudes are:

"I want (need) the available air time."

"I don't really care to listen to other people's ideas and opinions."

"I don't care about the growth of others."

"I'm adequately effective by operating this way — don't challenge me on this."

4. Group action, insofar as participation is concerned, is not doomed to the status quo. Bringing laboratory training programs into the organization, in the form of cousin and family training groups, is a road to more effective, cohesive work groups. For in such training endeavors members can learn that there are many "newer" values to be considered in the participation process, values which the work culture ordinarily overlooks.⁶

REFERENCES

1. D. Katz and R. L. Kahn, *The Social Psychology of Organizations*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966.
2. For an account of a sensitivity training laboratory in action, see Chris Argyris, "T-Groups for Organizational Effectiveness," *Harvard Business Review*, Mar.-Apr., 1964.
3. Alfred Vogel, "Why Don't Employees Speak UP?," *Personnel Administration*, May-June 1967.
4. Douglas McGregor, *The Professional Manager*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967.
5. E. L. Shostrom, *Man the Manipulator*, Abingdon Press, 1967.
6. For the basic works on laboratory training, see:
 - a. L. P. Bradford, J. R. Gibb and K. D. Benne, *T-Group Theory & Laboratory Method — Innovation in Re-Education*, John Wiley & Sons, 1964.
 - b. A. J. Marrow, *Behind the Executive Mask*, American Management Assn., 1964.
 - c. E. H. Schien and W. G. Bennis, *Personal & Organizational Change Through Group Methods: The Laboratory Approach*, John Wiley & Sons, 1965.