

Sensitivity Training: A Case History

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This is a description of how sensitivity training was introduced into and used in an industrial organization. As you read the events which follow, you will notice that the introduction of sensitivity training was the outgrowth of a normal sequence of events and was under the guidance and control of the company's training director.

This started when the president directed the training director to study what planning activities were practiced by the various levels of management and how these activities could be improved. He felt that production might be helped and the transition to new products facilitated if all managers would improve their planning skills.

The training director collected data for this study primarily through records and interviews; management of all levels and parts of the company were included. We will be concerned here only with the interview and the information obtained as a result of it.

The first part of each interview was nondirective. The training director encouraged the manager to talk freely; he interrupted only to have a point

clarified. During each interview he made verbatim notes of what was said by that manager. As the interview progressed, the training director jotted down points which were not clear. After the manager finished speaking, the training director asked him to clarify these points in detail. In this way, the training director was able to test the limits of the manager's true feelings about what he said.

As the interviews progressed and data accumulated, the training director discovered certain definite trends which were ultimately confirmed. This showed that managers felt they knew how to plan as did their subordinates and superiors; however, circumstances did not let them plan. There were apparently three main reasons, which were analyzed from the data, for this situation.

The Problems

First, 80% of the managers interviewed reported, what came to be called, leapfrogging. This occurred when a superior gave information or orders to a subordinate manager two or three

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levels lower without telling those in between. Many times such orders went completely contrary to the orders given by that manager's immediate supervisor. This usually caused a great deal of confusion. Some of the people who complained most bitterly about this happening were the worst offenders.

The second part of the problem involved hoarding and sending out selective (censored) information. Managers would give up only that information which they felt was absolutely necessary and only after it was well screened. This had three effects: first, information often of a critical nature would arrive late; second, there was a great deal of extra paper work created (people protected themselves by putting everything in writing); and third, it acted as one more barrier to organization change.

The third effect, and one of the most devastating, was complete individual and departmental conflict and competition. Departments, and even smaller units, felt themselves to be autonomous and in competition with all other parts of the company. Many companies face the problem of a sales department that is constantly in conflict with the production department and vice versa. It was this kind of situation, but multiplied many times over, that was going on throughout the whole organization.

These effects, in turn, caused a myriad of other problems to arise. Union shop stewards tried to play one department manager against another. Interdepartmental meetings called to solve common problems never got off the ground. The top men in the company increasingly found themselves involved in the day-to-day operation of running the company. Because of this, their

long-range job of planning began to slip badly; and each of these problems seemed to feed on every other problem.

Report on the Problems

At the conclusion of the study, the training director wrote two kinds of reports. The first one was directed toward people on the same management level, for example, superintendents. The second was directed at the management group in its entirety. Both reports consisted of actual comments made by those interviewed. There was, of course, no identification of the person making a comment and also no editorial comment by the training director. The only writing by the training director was an explanation of how the report was organized. However, where a comment was found difficult to understand, the training director would edit it and then ask for confirmation of the change by the person who originally made the comment. When completed, both reports were distributed to management.

After time had elapsed to digest the report and on the advice of the training director, top management met with the training director to consider the implications.

After discussion of several hours, they were unable to come to any general conclusion. Three executives asked, in different ways, why the group was unable to reach a decision on this report as well as on other problems in the past. As time went on, this group became increasingly concerned with this.

The only conclusion reached, if it can be called that, was that the training director would meet with a committee formed of their members and make some kind of formal recommendation. In

addition, the training director was to hold meetings with all the other levels of management to discuss what meaning this report might have. The results of these meetings were given directly to the committee.

Sensitivity Training

At the first meeting of the committee, the training director was asked to recommend the kind of training which might be used in this situation. He suggested that they defer that question until after they firmly fixed on paper the objectives they hoped to reach and the dimensions of a program to reach those objectives. Only after this was accomplished did the training director send to the committee members information on sensitivity training.

At the next meeting of the committee this information was discussed. They felt cautious about recommending that sensitivity training be generally used in the company. Instead they decided to have three members attend a sensitivity training program. After this the committee would investigate its use in other organizations and then make a recommendation.

There are strong indications that the more effective institute-type sensitivity training programs are directed and conducted by men who either are currently or have been industrial training executives for at least seven or eight years. Sensitivity training programs staffed by college teachers, some managers complain, are often clinical, overly theoretical, and unrealistic. They feel such people lack the hard-core industrial experience which makes sensitivity training really practicable and usable.

To get back to our case history. The three executives did attend an institute and were favorably impressed. This experience incidentally raised the value of the training director's stock in the company. The three managers might have just as easily returned opposed to sensitivity training. This will depend upon the personality of the manager as well as the program. Don't send problem managers to a sensitivity training program. It is training and not a short miracle psychotherapy.

Company Program

The committee met again. This time they decided to recommend that the top management group attend an outside sensitivity training program and at the same time that the training director put into effect a three-step sensitivity training program which had been jointly worked out. This was done. The following are its three parts.

First, all managers would attend a one-week sensitivity training course. This first course concentrated on the classical sensitivity training objectives: group leadership, decision-making, problem solving, causes of group problems and how they can be eliminated. Development groups were composed of managers on the same level but in different departments. There were twelve D-group meetings during this week. The other part of the program relied heavily on role-playing, business games, cases, and short lectures.

The second part of the program was a week in length also. Here the emphasis was on the organization and the problems of obtaining change. Development groups in this part were composed of people from different levels of man-

agement. However, no individual was in a group with anyone he either reported to or who reported to him. Business games were the major second vehicle again with short lectures.

The D-groups, in the first two parts, operated without trainers present in the group. In the last few years a number of industrial organizations have used this method. It is known variously as the trainerless group, leaderless group, and instrumented group.

The last part of the program often started during the time the first parts were in progress. In many cases it was a natural outgrowth. It would often begin when managers in the same department began practicing the skills and knowledge they had learned in training.

The third part had as its target the natural management work group. Here people who normally worked together were brought together in four-hour meetings every few weeks. They discussed at these meetings the problems of being open and frank and how they worked together as a unit. The training director sat with the groups to help them over the rough spots. In most cases this lasted for only a few meetings.

This third part was established without ending. The theory was that from time to time three-day sessions would be held with management to renew what they had learned and to further encourage free discussion among people who normally work together.

Conclusions

What can we as training directors conclude from this?

1. The training director's job is not only training but ranges through a

number of different areas. In this case he carried out a study, reported on it, worked with top management in interpreting the study, and finally recommended and carried out a long-range training program.

2. To do this he had to be flexible and knowledgeable. From a study originally designed to determine management's skill in planning, the training director had to shift his sights when he recognized the problem emerging and follow the lead. Next he had to recognize the kind of training which could best meet the needs which emerged and be familiar enough with sensitivity training to recommend training programs for his top group, and be capable of designing and presenting a sensitivity training program in his own company.
3. The training program which finally came to fruition was based on carefully studied needs of the organization. This was not a quick decision based on a fad or done under pressure. It gradually evolved as information was collected. With such activity, the influence and stock of the training director grows.
4. The training director made sure that top management was involved every step of the way. They with the training director set the objectives and attended outside sensitivity training.
5. The end result of the program—a more open management group—was arrived at slowly.
6. The program which finally emerged was geared to the long haul rather than for a short run.