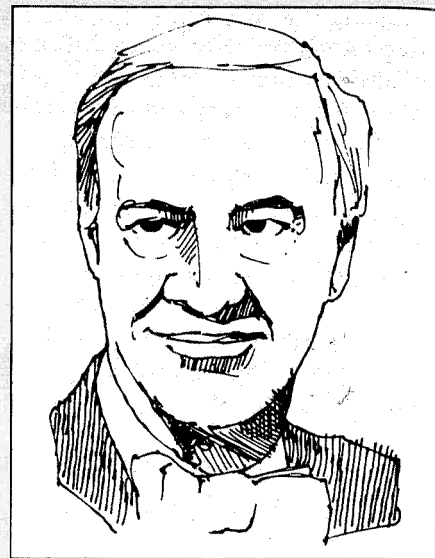


MALCOLM KNOWLES ON . . .



THE CHALLENGE OF THE '80s

For four days last August I participated in one of the most exhilarating learning experiences I can remember. It was the Fourth Annual Training and Development Leadership Symposium sponsored by the American Society for Training and Development. It was held at the Woodlands Inn, located a half-hour from the Houston airport in the midst of a forest. Talk about a climate conducive to learning!

The theme of the Symposium was "Trends and Technology for the 1980's," and I was asked to give the keynote address on "The Challenge of the '80s." I'd like to share with you some of my observations about the Symposium in general, then tell you some of my thoughts about the challenge of the '80s — since they fit in with the theme of this issue of the *Journal*. I'd also like to return to the ASTD Symposium and show how it serves as a model for training in the future.

First, about the Symposium. Why was it such an exhilarating experience? Perhaps the underlying reason is the very conception on which it was based — to provide a growth experience for the top leadership in our field. As is often true in our society, the assumption seems to have been made in our field historically that when people have made it to the top, they have no further need for professional development. Four years ago a group of ASTD leaders realized that in a world of accelerating change this just simply isn't so.

And so they conceived the idea of a leadership symposium which, in essence, would bring together a collection of the most experienced practitioners in our field to help one another grow.

This leads to the second reason for its being such an exhilarating experience — the caliber of people who were there. Although they were completely self-selected (except for a small group of 19 invited "facilitators"), they turned out to be 125 experienced trainers from a broad cross section of private corporations, consulting firms and public agencies — obviously with much to learn from one another. But more importantly, these people were almost to a person unusually open, warm, caring, enthusiastic, helpful and *eager* learners. The atmosphere they created was comfortable to be in and crackling with psychic electricity.

The third reason it was such a valuable experience was the design that co-chairpersons Geoff Bellman and Paul Chaddock and their helpers created and the smooth management of complicated logistics by ASTD staff members. But I want to postpone saying more about the program design until the end of this column.

So forward to "The Challenge of the '80s." My understanding of a keynote, whether it be for a choral group or a conference, is to provide a starting point for others to depart from in harmony. It should set a tone, not prescribe a line of action or give a solution. As

I saw it, two tones needed to be set: (1) a content tone — trends and technology for the 1980's, and (2) a process tone — a mutual sharing of resources in the quest for content outcome. It seemed to me that a straight speech in which I would lay out the trends of the future would result in a discord between these two tones.

So I asked participants to form small groups of five or six persons each and share what they would *like to see happen* in the field of training in the next decade, with one person in each group volunteering to provide a summary of ideas generated. After 10 minutes, I brought them back together and asked the reporters to select one or two trends that appealed to them and shout them out. Within another 10 minutes — with frequent interruptions for applause — a highly euphoric new world of training had been constructed. It was a world of accelerating expansion, professional sophistication, technological innovation and refinement, intellectual and financial support, psychic reward, social respectability and status, and other goodies I may have missed in the excitement.

I told participants that I agreed that these were all trends that I sensed in the atmosphere, that owing to a number of forces at work in our changing society the decade of the '80s is bound to be the most full of ferment, the most innovative and exciting in the history of human resources develop-

ment. I thanked them for writing most of the keynote address.

Reconceptualizing the Training Operation

I had one additional trend to add to the list. As we enter the '80s we are in the process of beginning to reconceptualize the very nature of the training operation. Up until now we have thought of training primarily as a set of activities — courses, seminars, workshops, institutes, multimedia packaged programs, etc. — with the responsibility of the training staff consisting mostly of managing the logistics of conducting these activities. The new concept that is floating in the air, stimulated no doubt by the impetus of systems theory, defines a social system (world, nation, community, organization, home) as a *system of learning resources*. When we start thinking this way, we have to redefine the nature and purpose of the HRD operation. Its task now becomes that of identifying *all* of the resources for learning in an environment and finding the most effective ways of linking these resources to the developmental needs of the occupants of the environment.

Among the resources for learning that typically exist in an organization are at least the following:

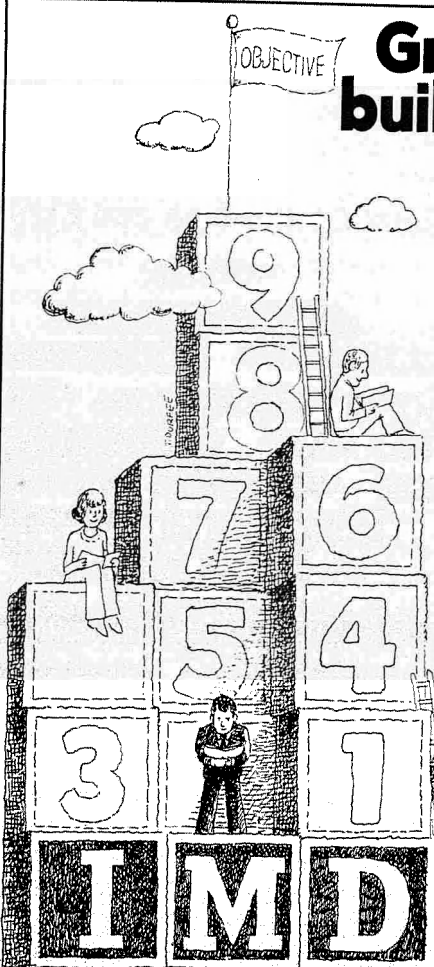
- All supervisors and managers;
- Peers in functional work groups;
- Individuals' daily experience;
- Seminars, workshops, institutes operated by the training department;
- Libraries and media centers;
- Personnel appraisal systems;
- Linkage with community resources — schools, colleges, commercial vendors of educational programs, consultants, retired people; and
- Supportive policies — flex-time, tuition reimbursement, rewards for improvement of performance.

Effective techniques for identifying all these resources and storing information about them so that it can be easily retrieved have been developed by the educational brokering agencies that are spreading like wildfire across the country. (You might want to get hold of

Educational Brokering: A New Service for Adult Learners by James Heffernan, Francis Macy, and Donn Vickers, National Center for Educational Brokering, 405 Oak St., Syracuse, N.Y. 13203.)

Then the challenge becomes one of devising ways to help employees make use of these resources for continuous, systematic self-development. The single most potent tool I have found for accomplishing this purpose is the *learning contract*, which I describe in my book, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 127-128 and 198-203. It is a device for enabling individual learners to construct a plan that involves (1) describing learning objectives, (2) identifying appropriate learning resources for each objective, (3) specifying a target date for accomplishing each objective, (4) describing what evidence will be collected to demonstrate the accomplishment of each objective, and (5) indicating how that evidence will be validated.

This way of thinking about HRD also has many implications for redefining the role of the professional training staff in the organization. For one thing, it requires that much of the training take place on the job, with supervisors and managers serving as facilitators and resource persons for their workers. Since few of them have had much training in performing such a role, a heavy responsibility rests with the training staff to build into their supervisory training and management development programs specific learning experiences on how to be a people-developer. It then requires that the training staff be available to line officers as consultants as they run into problems in performing this role. Another implication, of course, is that the training staff will have to devote more time and energy than has been typically the case in developing and operating a brokering agency. Meantime, they will have to continue operating the traditional training programs for



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those kinds of learnings that can be most effectively accomplished through organized activities.

In short, I see a very different way of thinking about the nature of human resources development and a very different set of roles for professional trainers emerging in the '80s.

Back to the Symposium . . .

What hit me between the eyes the first evening of the Symposium was that Geoff and Paul had created a design for a system of learning resources that had all the elements I have set forth above with the exception of learning contracts (but about half the participants got exposed to that process in the two workshops I did on the second day).

First of all, they identified a rich variety of learning resources — the 19 invited facilitators, about 20 participants had indicated in advance special resources they would be willing to share, and several participants who volunteered on

the spot. Large posters describing these resources (many of them with pictures of the resource people) were placed around the large room in which the opening session was held. Following the opening session, participants were invited to roam around the room, read the posters and talk with the resource people who stood by them. Participants were then asked to write on three by five inch slips the session titles they would like to participate in.

Geoff, Paul, and the ASTD staff worked well into the next morning shuffling these slips around in such a way that participants would be able to attend the maximum number of sessions they had chosen and yet no session would be larger than 30 people. At breakfast the next morning a large display board showed times and locations of all sessions. For the next two days participants participated in the sessions they had chosen. But in the course of their getting to know so many people so well, a number

of them discovered other resources to team up with. I was amazed at the number of clusters of two or three that I observed huddling together in the lounge areas between and during sessions.

The Symposium concluded the morning of the fourth day with several wrap-up presentations and a "Synthesis" session led by Dugan Laird (see pp. 18-20 in this issue), completing the circle around our newly formed system of learning resources. But the system lives on, for I know of several clusters of participants who before leaving the Woodlands Inn agreed to correspond and meet again, on their own — thus exemplifying another of the new ideas in adult education — the *learning network*. (One of these, spearheaded by Tom Jenkins, Larry Davis and Frederic Margolis even has given itself a name — The Andragogical Network.) — *Malcolm Knowles*

Malcolm Knowles is a consultant and President of Knowles Enterprises, Raleigh, NC. He Provides consultation and

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