

The Fear Factor in Training

A Case History in Building Training Morale

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To what extent is fear a major factor in training? Is it possible to reduce it? What are some of the methods for combatting it? Do these questions—and their answers—have any bearing on the pressing problems currently encountered in the training programs conducted under company, industry, or government auspices? The following case history may have considerable relevancy.

In April 1951, the Milk Industry Foundation, the national trade association of the fluid milk processing industry, inaugurated a comprehensive training program for the supervisors and executives of its member companies. Each session, held in a hotel in Washington, D. C., lasted two weeks and was of the most intensive nature. The size of the groups averaged about twenty in number—19.8 to be exact. The major emphasis was on sales and sales management; personnel recruit-

ment, selection, supervision and training; and employee morale and motivation. The course was outstandingly successful, a fact documented by its continued support by the companies concerned (expenses averaged from \$300 to \$350 per man enrolled) and by the hundreds of letters, unsolicited, attesting its practical value.

Interview Survey

Information was obtained in personal interviews with 620 of the approximately 1,100 men and *two* women who came to the sessions, during the period from April 1952 to December 1957. It was secured by the most informal methods in answer to three questions: (1) Do you have any personal problems in connection with the course? (2) How can this program help you to solve the main supervisory problems in your company? (3) What courses of action do you intend to

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take on returning home?

Of the 620 men who gave answers to the first question (the only one of concern here), which could be classified and recorded, 422 or 68.1 per cent said that fear, or something readily translatable into it, was "a considerable problem." Of these 422 men, 90 of them had some tension and fear when they knew that they were to participate in a panel discussion; and 332 were fearful of the "public" speech they were to make in class under the guidance of a university speech instructor. (There was, of course, some overlapping in the answers concerning the panels and the speeches; a considerable number expressed apprehension in relation to both; for purposes of simplification, we can disregard the duplication.)

The youngest participant in the entire group was 19 years old and the oldest 60 with most members in the 30-to-40 age bracket. The average participant had a high school education. No attempt was made to correlate responses to the questions with age or education; the objective was solely to gain spot information of value to both training director and trainee. Most of the informal interviews (or, more appropriately, fruitful conversations) were held during the first two days of the course.

Reasons for Training Failure

The first question helps to pinpoint the reasons for the failure or the diminished success of any adult training program. Of the numerous possibilities here, and now we are speaking in general, some pertain to the character of the instruction, some to the nature of those instructed. The trainer may be deficient in knowledge, in ability to communicate, and in essential personality attributes. The trainee may be lacking in requisite mental ability and foundation knowledge, in motivation,

and in proper frame of mind for maximum receptivity. These deficiencies may, and usually do, react upon each other: dull lectures by a not-fully-knowledgeable or less-than-articulate trainer quickly lead to a decrease in interest. Poor backgrounds of trainees lead to frustration of both trainer and trainee and to less than optimum success. Like one of the early predecessors of the corporation, training is fundamentally a "joint venture."

We shall concentrate on proper mental outlook. Highly subjective indeed is this matter of proper mental set. It is compounded of many ingredients, but of these selfsame parts, one of them is certainly *not* fear—destructive fear which inhibits learning. Tension and nervousness, fear itself, pose a psychological problem in industrial training of broader dimension and greater magnitude than is often realized. It is an ever-recurrent problem when new groups begin a training program. "Fear often disorganizes and frustrates people so that they are incapable of their best performance . . . there is often present a fear, or anxiety, or insecurity among employees. In a new job, employees are frequently worried about whether they can meet standards. The supervisor should try to prevent rather than to induce fear."¹

Indoctrinating the Indoctrinator

The fear factor, one aspect of resistance to training, must be frankly recognized and positively controlled. It can never be reduced to zero, even if that should be desirable, but its most damaging consequence in training—reduction in the efficiency of the learning process—can be minimized. Here are some of the procedures employed successfully in the MIF training program which might be applied with equal effectiveness by another company or industry under similar circumstances.

The training director himself must fully realize his own personal stake in the success of the mission and his influence on the group. Only in that way can he faithfully impart to the trainees a feeling of constructive accomplishment and of participation in a program of great consequence. Only if he, himself, is confident and at ease will the trainees also be confident and at ease. And his own enthusiasm, or lack of it, immediately reflects itself within the group. Moreover, it is only if and when the top management, the highest executives of company or industry, clearly and affirmatively demonstrate their own personal interest and support that the program can reach full maturity and fruition. (The President of the Milk Industry Foundation attended the opening session and a number of the others; and the Foundation's own top professional executive, its Executive Director, invariably appeared at every session and took an active part in it.)

"All Due Deliberate Speed"

In a course of two weeks with such important objectives, there is a constant temptation to speed up the tempo, to get on with the show. But *it is a mistake to move too quickly, especially in the first part of the program.* A large part of the entire first day of the MIF program was devoted to indoctrination, a process which continued to some extent during the first week. The time required, whatever it may be, is time well spent; undue haste will entail costly "penalty payments" later in the currency of damaging nervous tension and destructive fear. "All due deliberate speed" to quote the famous words of the Supreme Court, provides the key.

Style and Format

The training director sets the style. MIF experience indicates that he

should inject humor whenever it will be helpful but in no event should he indulge in or countenance profanity or off-color stories of any kind or character, or even a suggestion of it. It takes time and skill to tell a humorous story or anecdote well; but many a potentially embarrassing situation can be eliminated by a hearty laugh. But it is never wise to overdo it; the humor ought to be appropriate and, when possible, related directly to the topic under discussion.

Good Physical Arrangements

Providing instruction of the highest quality remained the paramount principle throughout the sessions; but the physical setting contributed significantly to success. Trainees were comfortably seated in cushioned armchairs around a large green-felt-covered table. Every morning and afternoon the director or his assistant changed the positions of the name-cards. During the entire two weeks of the first session, seating order remained unchanged. At the second, it was decided to change the order once a day. At the third, the twice-daily changes were inaugurated. It was shown by actual experiment that this procedure produced best results in reducing fatigue and eliminating cliques; that it removed even a semblance of preference in seating; and that it encouraged a free and open camaraderie among members of the group.

Tested Tension Reducers

The conference-style arrangement is itself important. More than merely avoiding the negative goal of eliminating the formal classroom set up, with painful memories for some, it adds positive values in facilitating face-to-face communication and the easy give-and-take of discussion.

No MIF trainee can forget the sheriff and his posse busily collecting,

during the "breaks," the ten-cent fines assessed for minor infractions of the "laws of the house," all in good spirit but with a serious purpose. One fine, the largest revenue producer, was collected for calling the route salesman a "routeman" or some other unacceptable term. The emphasis in the sessions was to build sales volume through developing the route salesman; with special emphasis on morale and prestige. The correct use of terms has important implications. The sheriff and his deputy were designated purely by seating arrangement. At the end of the session the considerable sum collected was donated to the Children's Hospital of Washington.

Beating the Bugaboo of Testing

The mere thought of examinations may reduce even the most self-confident to a state of tension bordering on the neurotic. Yet, as we know, testing is an integral part of the process of education and can be eliminated only at a loss in the feedback control which is the essence of a communications system. The MIF program attacked the malady of examination phobia in two ways: by controlled self-grading on the first examination, and by use of the matched teams approach on the second.

Carefully drawn short-answer questions, word-and-phrase completions, and true-false questions made up the first examination which each participant took individually. Each member kept and scored his own paper as the best answers were discussed round-robin style and approved by class consensus and the training director. As a matter of conscious policy, this procedure was not explained to the group on the day before the test. Thus, some slight degree of tension prior to the examination might reasonably have been expected; the participants were doubtlessly somewhat keyed up for

the test. The evidence shows that most participants devoted considerable time to study and review of the three MIF sales manuals which made up the "core curriculum." But when they were actually taking the test, the tension had been relaxed to a very great degree by the method of its administration. No grades were obtained, but they were not considered necessary. There was, nevertheless, motivation aplenty in the friendly rivalries of group members.

Final Exam

The final examination on the last day consisted of comprehensive multiple-choice questions providing a review of the course highlights. The method used in presenting the test proved both stimulating and successful: examination on the basis of competing groups. Before the class, the name cards were placed so that three selected members seated contiguously took the examination together. The teams were "matched" as equally as possible with the strongest men distributed proportionately to each of the six of seven groups. The participants were then asked to complete the examination elsewhere and to return promptly at the exact time designated (with the penalty for tardiness a sheriff's fine and a deduction from the examination "score").

When the entire group was reassembled, the questions were discussed thoroughly and correct answers given. Every question and its answer were therefore discussed twice: first by the members of each team in arriving at answers and, then, by the entire class. This method reinforced learning by repetition; it reduced tension and generated an extraordinary degree of team spirit and rivalry. The "prize" for the top team was the privilege of buying refreshments for the class and the training director.

Reasons for Success

In retrospect and from the vantage point of years, the success of the MIF program stemmed from a complex of causes. Among the foremost of these, without question, was the development of group morale. The goal was certainly not the complete elimination of nervous tension; for a certain amount of it may have its own advantages. The purpose of the procedures utilized was, rather, to maintain a group alert but not apprehensive, interested but not inhibited.

While there is clearly no guarantee that the fear-fighting practices described can apply to every training situation, there is sound reasoning to support the view that at least part of it can be utilized successfully elsewhere. With the explosion of knowledge in the "information revolution," training becomes of ever greater importance. Its techniques become part of the national arsenal in the fight for enlightenment.

Need in National Programs

The Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962 puts its finger

neatly on a major national dilemma: the problem of unemployment in an affluent society while jobs are going begging because of lack of skills on the part of the unemployed. The Economic Opportunity Act is in large part a reiteration of the refrain that education will help provide the passport to the new Arcadia; that, to continue the figure, it will provide the visa for entering the great society and sampling the fruits of affluence. Such is the theory.

But Job Corps dropouts are posing a pressing and largely unexplored problem. According to press reports, Job Corps administrators were reluctant to grant Christmas leaves because of openly-expressed fear that many trainees (indeed an unacceptable number) would not return to their camps. There are obviously basic reasons explaining this. An important underlying cause may well be the old familiar *fear factor*—fear of exposure of ignorance, fear of ridicule, fear of the new, the unknown. Whatever the problem is, intensified efforts to build group morale would bring a handsome return on the investment.

Reference

1. Harrell, Thomas W., "Industrial Psychology" (Rev.), Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961, pp. 14, 15).

Westinghouse to Operate Atterbury Job Center

Westinghouse Electric Corporation assumed operational control of the Atterbury Job Corps Center at Edinburg, Indiana, on June 1. Midwest

Education Foundation continued to provide limited services until the normal expiration date of its contract, June 30.