"WE ARE INSTRUCTOR-DRIVEN, LEARNER-DRIVEN, *AND* PLANS-DRIVEN — NOT ONE OR THE OTHER."

WHAT DRIVES TRAINING?

BY CHESTER DELANEY

One of the many inestimable things that Malcolm Knowles has done for training and education has been to center attention on the learner, rather than the instructor. He has, with deserved insistence, driven home the point that the old normal school preoccupation with teaching method was misplaced, and that the emphasis should rather be on how people learn: learning theory instead of teaching methods.

The graduate of "Methodology 101," with its focus on teaching method, is often the dutifully prepared teacher complacent in the conviction that the job is done when a careful, thorough, and *au courant* lesson plan has been covered . . . even if the students didn't get it. The ultimate caricature is the teacher who suffers from the well rationalized "I presented the material, if they didn't learn it's their problem" syndrome, which simply ignores the primary purpose of a classroom or any learning situation.

The potential exists for an analogous reversal of priorities in the very organization and activity of a training group. If the training department is organized basically as a faculty of teachers, then, human nature being what it is, the department will tend to offer training in those things the teachers can teach. Its offerings will be instructor-driven, rather than learner driven.

There are, of course, real advantages to an instructor-driven approach to training — advantages which add to its basic appeal of providing a platform for teachers to do what they themselves were trained 'for, advantages which might even make it the strategy of choice in a given circumstance or for a given time. For one thing, the approach is the epitome of that most magisterial of personnel axioms: feed your staff's strengths, and starve its weaknesses. Thus, if the department includes a top instructor in Transactional Analysis, then it makes good sense to put that strength to use, especially since interpersonal skills are always needed. If it is not possible to

offer instruction in everything, it is only too perfectly plausible to zero in on those subjects the staff can do well.

Another advantage of the instructor-driven philosophy is that it makes for relatively easy planning by the training department's users. Since the training director can be certain about *what* will be offered and *when* (the training staff's capabilities and availabilities define these variables neatly), training users have a clear prospectus of course offerings on which to base their training plans — the dollars, the students, the length and timing of absences from work station or desk. There is no denying the security that such an approach offers to both trainers and users of training.

Still another advantage of an instructor-driven training strategy is that it is possible to hire or develop instructors to cover important topics. What corporation doesn't need management training, supervisory skills or introductory data processing? It makes a certain amount of unimpeachable sense to ensure that these needs

are covered by providing instructors equipped to teach these subjects.

The Disadvantages of Instructor-Driven Training

However, and at least to this writer's mind there is indeed a very large and emphatic "however," the advantages of instructor-driven training are either outweighed by much stronger disadvantages or are doubly dangerous because they are more apparent than real. There is first and foremost the inverted focus *a la* Knowles: instructor-driven training doesn't respond to the corporation's needs, but rather to the instructor's. It shifts momentum in the wrong direction when needs analysis is done. In fact, it fosters the illusion that needs analysis is a task to be scheduled only periodically, at budget time or once every six months, rather than an ongoing responsibility of line management supported by the training staff.
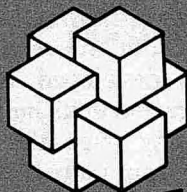
Another disadvantage of the faculty-oriented structure is that of stagnation. This is particularly true in technical environments, but holds to some degree elsewhere as well. The teacher of technology must have the opportunity to work at that technology to avoid going stale as a teacher, to say nothing of becoming technically *passe*. The philistine wisdom of technical arrogance has always had it that those who can't do, teach. The reality would seem rather to be that those who teach must do, or become ultimately unable to continue teaching effectively.

A particularly seductive danger of the instructor-driven training philosophy is that it provides the illusion of accomplishment. The security of firm schedules, implemented plans and quantifiable results is profoundly satisfying. And there is, after all, a great deal going on in the training department if its faculty is teaching its catalog of courses every quarter. The stats pile up: classes conducted, modules completed, students taught, budget expended. The basic flaw remains, not that the teaching is useless or poorly done, but rather that it is quite possibly badly focused and ill considered. The constant round of activity throws dust in the eyes of those who might see more judiciously if the fundamental basis of the activity itself were conceived differently.

Evaluation of Instructor-Driven Training

Along the same line, evaluations of instructor-driven training will tend to be instructor-oriented as well, all too often even instructor designed, administered, and analyzed. Evaluation will center on the teacher and the class conducted, rather than on the effects of the training back on the job. One of the worst truths in the business is that an experienced trainer can always leave a class laughing, raving, delighted, insisting this was the best damn program the company has ever had and we should have had it years ago and can you make my boss go? The evaluation of training is far and away the most difficult part of the entire process if it tries to get beyond indexing student

happiness. Evaluation from teacher-oriented focus, a bias all the more powerful for being so often unexamined, increases this difficulty immensely.

A training department driven by learner needs rather than instructor needs will take a very different shape from the faculty structure. It will focus directly and continually on the classic four steps demanded of training:

• the identification of training needed,

• the design or selection of training to meet the needs identified,

• the delivery of training designed/selected,

• the evaluation of training delivered.

A learner-driven training staff will carry out these tasks by functioning more as analysts or consultants than as a faculty of instructors. The difference is most visible in the matter of delivering needed training. A member of the training staff may indeed teach, because that may be the most cost effective or most efficient way to deliver a particular course. But the teaching of its own staff members will be only one weapon in the training department's armamentarium for getting the job done. It will in fact be the training specialist's responsibility to draw on the most suitable alternative from that armory for each instance of training need uncovered or perhaps to offer an array of alternatives, with recommendations, from which users can choose.

This is not an easy task. The alternatives for delivering training are numerous, and assessing them will demand a variety of training-related skills quite different from a faculty orientation. The use of training consultants from outside the organization is one obvious way to provide needed training. This would require the training staff to interface with consultants, draw up specifications to which they can respond, select among competing proposals, and monitor consultant performance against specifications. Another important delivery alternative is to find someone in a line area with the requisite knowledge, teaching ability, time and willingness to provide a needed training class. This route demands a different set of abilities from the training analyst — judging another's communications skills, honing them, supporting course design and implementation by someone other than a full-time trainer. A third example of training alternatives is the world of independent study, arrayed in multi-media splendor: video assisted, computer-aided, audio-cassette-based and programmed-instructed. Not only must the in-house training consultant be able to evaluate and select from among this dazzling panoply, s/he must also be prepared to structure and support self-study as a serious means of effective learning, responsibilities which are in themselves both complex and formidable.

Take a Proactive Approach

It is worth noting again that a learner-driven approach in no sense precludes the possibility that members of the training department will teach courses. It does, however, make this option precisely that: one option among many, with the decision based not merely on inertia or the need to be active, but rather upon managed choice.

There is a further refinement. The description of learner-driven training is by definition reactive. The process is one of finding training needs and scrambling (gracefully) to provide for them. Such a model is clearly reactive, and that is as it should be. Indeed, being responsive is the quintessential quality of the learner-driven approach and is perhaps its single greatest strength.

A training department should ultimately strive to become plans-driven, which is to say proactive instead of solely reactive. Obviously a blend of the two modalities is the ideal. But the plotting of corporate-wide training needs and objectives into calendar quarters should eventually get well out in front of today, well out in front of discovering and pooling requirements generated by this year's employee career aspirations and upcoming project plans. The learner needs to which plans-driven training is responsive will be derived from sources like the strategies developed to position the corporation in its industry or in the economy over the next few years. Or from industry forecasts, particularly in those areas dominated by technology. Or from the long range plans that a department may make because of its peculiar circumstances or its enlightened management. A training group driven by plans is definitely learner (not instructor) oriented, but it provides a fuller spectrum of learner-driven training because the needs to which it is responding include the long-term rather than just the immediate.

"We are driven," shouts the Datsun crescendo. We trainers are too. We are instructor-driven, learner-driven and plans-driven. No single training group can be purely one or the other. But determining which of these three orientations will prevail involves important differences of organization, activity and outcome. The choice should be made with wide open eyes, certainly not merely as a matter of default.

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