

A Business Game from England . . .

"In Tray" Training Exercises

Several military and industrial applications of the English version of "In-Basket" simulation

H. E. FRANK and S. J. PRINGLE

"In-Tray" is one of the names given to a type of training exercise in which the trainee is given some correspondence and asked to deal with it as if he were the person to whom the correspondence is addressed.

He is expected to take whatever action he considers appropriate, such as immediate disposal of certain items, request for further information, or delegation.

The trainee is confronted with letters, memoranda and other kinds of material requiring action, such as reports, complaints, suggestions, problems, documents for approval and the like. They resemble correspondence received in working situations and give variety in scope and complexity. Much of the material is inter-related, so that effective action on one item depends on information contained in another.

The content of the "In-Tray" usually bears close relationship to the degree of skill and responsibility required at the trainee's level. Normally the addressee's job is the same as that of the trainee or that for which the trainee is studying on the course, so that he is able to carry out the exercise without any special briefing. In other cases he may be asked to assume the role of an addressee whose experience and background are quite different.

The background to and setting of the exercise or a sheet of instructions for carrying out the exercise may be included in the "In-Tray," or this may be given verbally by the tutor. Organization charts, position descriptions, office forms and stationery to be used in responding to the problems may also be issued.

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The training group to which the "In-Tray" exercise is presented normally consists of men at the same level of the work force or of management.

The number of items and degree of complexity are intended to ensure that a realistic but not undue pressure is simulated; it is necessary for the trainee to exercise judgment about the relative importance of the various matters and use the allotted time in the most effective way. Where it is considered desirable to increase pressure during the exercise additional material, or distractions and interruptions such as telephone calls, or questions from the tutor, or a filmed interruption by a "caller," can be introduced.

R.A.F. Exercises For Procedures

There are a number of variations of the exercise, but broadly each is designed to fulfill one of two main purposes. The first of these is to illustrate and consolidate the teaching of procedures. This purpose is exemplified by two exercises used by the R.A.F.

The Officer Cadet Training Unit of the R.A.F. uses "Office Procedure Exercise," to provide practice in office procedure which the cadets have been learning on the course.

The material used is employed for succeeding courses but is revised to keep it in line with current procedures.

The exercise is closely controlled by the Directing Staff. To simulate realistic pace, staff feed in more correspondence as the exercise progresses. They also give assistance to cadets who need it.

The exercise is completed in one day at the end of which a critique or "de-

briefing" session is held with the assembled training group.

A more sophisticated version is used at the R.A.F.'s Junior Staff Course. In exercise "Staff Work" the officers are divided into groups of seven. Each officer is assigned a staff role and consults with his colleagues when dealing with correspondence. When action has been taken, the file is passed to the Directing Staff member in charge of the group who makes the necessary corrections of procedure. Halfway through the exercise, each officer changes his role so as to enable him to experience responsibility at a different level.

The trainees do not receive a batch of correspondence at the beginning; one task at a time is issued to each group by the Directing Staff who, on its completion, gives criticism at once. There is no general critique session at the end.

Communications and Decision-Making Exercises

The second main purpose is to develop skills, particularly those of communication and decision making.

In all but the most elementary applications of the exercise, the trainee has to reach a decision about his purpose and has to employ skill, particularly communicative skill, in achieving it. He has to convey accurately information and instruction as well as his intentions and feelings.

Here a vital element in the training process is the evaluation, interpretation and discussion of the ways in which the problems were handled. A time equal to that for doing the exercise is usually required for discussion. Participants may be asked how they dealt with the prob-

lems or the tutor may give an analysis of the replies. Through discussion of the various ways used for each problem participants may learn much about the principles underlying effective administration.

This second purpose is illustrated below by three examples: one used by the army and two by industry, which is increasingly using the "In-Tray" training technique.

The Staff College at Camberley has an exercise called Letter Writing 5. Here the Directing Staff member assumes the role of a GSOI* and a group member that of the GSOII, at the same H.Q. The other group members act as members of the GSOII's staff. In a private session GSOI gives GSOII an outline of the day's work, and passes over correspondence. GSOII then has to do or delegate the work as he thinks fit. The problems are practical and call for the exercise of skills and knowledge taught on the course. The "tutorial correction" as the critique session is called takes place eight days after the main exercise. The trainees are issued with possible good answers to the problems. These answers are part of the case material and are returned to the Directing Staff at the end of the exercise.

In one industrial version the circumstances are that the trainee is about to take up a managerial appointment. While on his way to a conference, which will keep him away for another week, he calls in his new office after hours.

*GSOI means General Staff Officer Grade I and GSOII means General Staff Office Grade II. They rank as Lieutenant-Colonel and Major respectively. Officers of the General Staff are responsible for operations and training.



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There he finds a batch of correspondence demanding his immediate attention. He is given one hour to deal with this alone and in writing. A group critique session follows later in the course. The tutor suggests some possible answers to the correspondence. These "models" are part of the exercise material prepared in advance and are not distributed to the students.

In another version, each trainee plays a role similar to his own job. This saves him the labour of thinking himself into a role for which a great deal of explanatory matter is required. (It has been suggested that the exercise in imagination required for the successful assumption of a strange role has no significant training value, and that it may act as an emotional barrier which prevents the trainee from benefiting fully from the exercise).

"In-Tray" Benefits

Because most people in positions of any responsibility are confronted with an "In-Tray" every day of their working lives there is a strong element of realism in this training technique. Where the trainee is required to work alone, full participation and concentration are assured. The time limit forces him to plan his work priority-wise.

When trainees are required to work as a team, sharing the task of dealing with correspondence, the exercise gives practice in delegation and consultation.

In the "In-Tray" the trainee or the group has to produce replies which can be more readily and more precisely assessed than opinions produced by group discussion. This is a special advantage for those who are reluctant to take part in discussion.

Probably the most significant advantage of "In-Tray" over comparable exercises is the opportunity it gives the trainee to test his ability to convey meaning and purpose in writing — by checking immediately the effect of his communication on the tutor and the other members of the training group.

Some Possible Disadvantages

Some trainers hold that "In-Tray" has a number of disadvantages: because the manager in real life seldom works without advice and consultation and that to make full use of these is a significant part of his job, trainees should not have to work entirely alone as happens in some versions of "In-Tray."

Retention by the tutorial staff of the written work may make trainees feel that the exercise is being used as a means of examination or assessment; this might make them nervous and detract from the training value of the exercise.

Some trainees may try to derive principles from the tutor's suggestions and attempt to apply them without further thought to situations arising in their own work.

Summary

The adaptability of the exercise to a wide variety of interests and levels, and the fact that it uses the method of "learning by doing," can make it an effective training device. To make the time taken in preparing and doing the exercise, including the all important critique session, really worthwhile, care must be taken to relate closely the material and the method of conducting the exercise to the needs of the training group and to the purpose of the course in which the exercise is being used.