SENSITIVITY TRAINING

background and implications for contemporary executive development programs

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Gather any random group of management scholars and/or practitioners together, bring up the topic of sensitivity training, and you witness one form of behavior popularly associated with sensitivity training itself: namely, vigorous, emotional communication. Training centers and trainers (called change agents if serving as consultants) are springing up everywhere, so one or more persons present for the discussion often have participated in sensitivity training. (Such individuals generally take a very positive view.) Contrawise, other discussants are emphatic that such training is "dangerous-pseudo-psycho-therapy."

If one can take the growth of laboratory training as an indicator of intrinsic worth, sensitivity training has passed the test of the market. Nonetheless, the discussion seems to have intensified in the last five years, and positive[1] as well as skeptical[2] assessments appear in the literature.

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief statement of the theoretical tradition out of which sensitivity training has evolved, a terse description of laboratory designs, some defensible propositions concerning the effectiveness of sensitivity training, and some practical conclusions about the place of sensitivity training in management development programs. As such, the article is a position paper, rather than an encyclopedic review of the literature; but is based on a careful review of the research.

LABORATORY TRAINING AND HUMANISTIC SOCIAL SCIENCE

Sensitivity training seeks to provide a mechanism for personal learning and development in terms consistent with the perspective of such writers as Fromm,[3] Maslow,[4] McGregor,[5] Rogers,[6] Argyris,[7] Bennis,[8] Harvey, Hunt and Schroder,[9] Shepard[10] and Likert.[11]

To these social scientists, modern man is victimized by a (particularized) conception of man, and by social structures which are both reifications of, and mechanisms for reinforcement of, this conception. Called variously Theory X, the primary mentality, or classical theory, these writers attack this conception of the individual and his role in complex organizations contained in the conception as:[12]

1. Failing to adequately allow for personal growth and development of mature personalities.

2. Establishing a power system that is intrinsically conservative, stifling innovation and change.

3. Providing limited mechanisms for juridical processes and facilitation of creative mechanisms for conflict resolution.

4. Contributing to communication blockages and distortion, and enhancing a facade of conformity.

Indeed, Riesman calls such classical organizational models "systems of antagonistic cooperation,"[13] since behavior within systems consistent with the classical conception involve a complex of compromises, bargains, victories and defeats: According to him this results in behavior which saps excessive energy from the system and, in Fromm's terms, alienates the individual from both himself and others.[14]

Thus, to these scientists, classical conceptions of the individual and his social role in complex organizations present a somewhat paranoid world.

In their view, the necessary precondition for development of more functional and less stressful organizations is the development of interpersonal relations within organizations characterized by trust, openness, authenticity, valid communication, spontaneity, genuineness, and problem-centeredness.[15] These are, of course, characteristics of the "self-actualized man." Argyris speaks of "authentic" relationships,[16] Rogers of "genuine" relationships,[17] Maslow of "Being-love,"[18] and Likert of "ego-supportive relations."[19]

Organizational systems based on such relationships are characterized by collaboration rather than competition, con-

commitant individual freedom and responsibility, open communication, shared goals, and shared leadership.

The central deterrent to personal maturity, self-actualization, and a system of interpersonal relations with the above characteristics is seen as anxiety; anxiety arising from interpersonal threat, aggression, or a blocked stage of personality development.[20] Sensitivity training must be understood as seeking to facilitate the development of such a humanistic organizational system, by allowing the individual the opportunity to experiment with new behavior and eliminate dysfunctional anxiety.

LABORATORY DESIGNS

Laboratory training encompasses a wide range of training designs, giving differential emphasis to individual self awareness (in the tradition of Rogers)[21] as opposed to emphasis on awareness of group role and processes (in the tradition of Lewin).[22] The more-or-less traditional "stranger laboratory" is of the latter sort. Since this design has been fully described in the literature, a cursory perusal will suffice.[23]

The typical "stranger laboratory" consists of about 20 people from a variety of backgrounds, organizational roles, and occupations. The members of the laboratory are assigned to T-groups, subgroups of about 10 members, which are the central mechanisms for learning about personal and interpersonal behavior. The T-groups typically meet in morning, afternoon and evening sessions. A chronology of the T-group experience might be summarized as follows:

1. Initially, there is a purposeful lack of directive leadership, formal agenda, power and status which provides a behavioral vacuum which members fill by enormously rich projections of traditional behavior (resort to status clue sending; formalization; structured leadership; power plays; etc.)

2. Feedback, based on the "here-and-now" behavior of members in the anxiety laden, non-directive situation, begins as a means of providing

valid confirmation (or disconfirmation) of instrumental role effectiveness and/or personality impact. In this phase, the trainer sets the tone by open, non-defensive, empathetic and genuine expressing of his own feelings in a minimally evaluative way.

> There is a cycle of mutual distrust and threat followed by the beginning of a cycle of openness and mutual trust.

3. The development of interpersonal relationships where members serve as resources to one another, facilitating experimentation with new personal and interpersonal behavior; particularly collaborative behavior.

4. The exploration of the relevance of the experience in terms of "back home" situations and problems to enhance transferability of learning beyond the laboratory.

Interspersed in the laboratory design are lectures and seminars designed to help participants cognitively "map" the learning experiences within the T-groups. Likewise, exercises dealing with problem-solving situations, role playing, communication nets, and inter-group collaboration are injected.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT LAB

By contrast to the "stranger laboratory," the "personal development" laboratory is focused on the individual, and his existential experience. Schutz posits three basic assumptions which underlie the design of the "personal development" lab: (1) that it is good to free a person to experience his world more fully; (2) that this experience must not be primarily cognitive, but must allow the full development of feelings and emotions; and (3) that the unconscious plays a crucial role in learning and emotional development, so that childhood experiences and unresolved emotional problems which have caused blocks, defenses, and distortions can be dealt with.[24]

The central mechanisms for learning designed in terms of these assumptions are for people to open up, to free themselves from inhibitions, to express their

pent up feelings. Task-instrumental behavior and role relationships are largely ignored. Exercises in this type of laboratory consist of such activities as the use of assigned names, exploration of day dreams and fantasies, body movements, and non-verbal physical encounters.[25]

FAMILY GROUPS

Not all laboratory designs, of course, are "stranger labs." Increasingly, "family groups" (task groups such as R and D departments), are the forms of attention. Likewise, elaborate designs involving a complex strategy for organizational development including attention to intergroup linkages are being activated by "change agents" within the organization itself. Such designs include the interfacing of diagnostic surveys, interviews, and confrontation sessions dealing with a variety of policy, problem-solving and interpersonal issues with T-group experiences. A very careful sequence of "spreading" such organizational development experiences, and means for avoiding coercive involvement in intra-organizational designs is contained in the literature.[26]

EVIDENCE OF LABORATORY TRAINING EFFECTIVENESS

There is sufficient research to end any dispute concerning whether laboratory training can be a vital learning experience. Adequately designed experimental research is found dealing with both short and long-run effects of T-group training in "stranger labs," as well as numerous case studies of individual organizational designs using "family groups." Admitting that much of the research is recent, and occasionally contradictory results are present, the following positive findings, nonetheless, seem supportable on the basis of empirical studies:[27]

1. Assessments by participants themselves, relative to their learning, indicate:
   --generally favorable responses to the learning experience
   --lessened tension, and greater capacity for honesty, and assertiveness in interpersonal relations

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--greater self-acceptance

2. Assessments by colleagues of participants "back home" show that individuals having undergone sensitivity training are seen as:

--being more understanding of social systems within which they work

--having greater awareness of the impact of their personality on others

--being more able to control their own behavior

--being more open and effective in communication

--having greater role flexibility.

However, these payoffs are more evident in terms of reactive than proactive behavior. That is, individuals are better able to receive, accept, tolerate, and be comfortable with their environment than they are able to assertively act upon their environment. In an organization which provides little reinforcement, the individual's repertoire of interpersonal skills are enlarged, but may be utilized in a least-cost fashion, avoiding any direct confrontation with existing organizational behavior patterns.[28]

Individual differences clearly interact with the above results, in two respects: (1) individuals tend to focus on selective, perceived-personally-relevant problems (for example, a dominant individual may center attention on the impact of his undue prominence, remaining insensitive to the issue of affection) and (2) healthy, open, unconflicted individuals learn more than closed, neurotic, conflicted persons. The rich get richer. Not everyone learns with equal facility, and some individuals manage to insulate themselves from learning quite effectively. (Likewise, people of different occupations show different degrees of internalization and facility for implementation of training.)[29]

CONCLUSIONS: THE PLACE OF SENSITIVITY TRAINING IN MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

The enthusiasm of laboratory alumni, as well as the demonstrable effectiveness of sensitivity training has earned a definite place for sensitivity training in management development programs.[30] The following caveats are offered in the spirit of serious concerns which must be faced up to, however, if laboratory training is to be optimally and intelligently employed:

1. There are responsible ethical concerns. Clearly volunteerism, careful prescreening of trainees to avoid individuals with low tolerance for stress, careful selection of the trainer, and continuous evaluative feedback (generated by well designed research) are minimal preconditions for a program.

2. There should be no confusion of personal sensitivity training with organizational development. An effective program of organizational development is not assured by innoculating a few individuals in "stranger labs." "Stranger labs" are useful preorganizational development support activities. Organizational development itself is a complex program of developmental activities in which laboratory designs are vital but not sufficient inputs.

3. "Personal development" labs are quite appropriately controversial at this time. Because of the higher anxiety context, the greater risk of psychological failure,[31] their similarity to psycho-therapy, sans psychoanalytic theory,[32] and the increased problems of learning transfer due to the remoteness of the insight relative to instrumental and organizational concerns,[33] at the present time their appropriateness in a management development context can be questioned. Ethical, theoretical, and applicational issues surrounding this particular design are very much open issues. At the least, the trainee should realize he is approaching a situation akin to a psychoanalytic experience.

4. A great deal more attention to building-in mechanisms for transferability of learning to the organiza-
tional setting needs to be generated. Several modifications of the "stranger-lab" design have been suggested containing mechanisms presently being utilized to enhance transferability to the organizational setting.[34] The burden of stimulating such design experiments rests with those concerned with managerial development.[35]

5. Given the increasing proliferation of laboratory designs, and the lack of adequate learning theory and data to discriminate between the effectiveness of these designs, a heavier dose of research feedback into the fluid and dynamic world of laboratory training would help both trainers and users to discriminate and choose between designs in light of specific personal and organizational needs.

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30. This conclusion in no way minimizes negative findings such as those reported by Shein and Bennis, Argyris, and Oshrey and Harrison, nor the serious problems with respect to transferability from stranger labs to organizational contexts suggested by them. Nor does it ignore the fact that exactly which laboratory designs are most effective remains indeterminant on the basis of present research. It does, however, post that the majority evidence consistent across a variety of laboratory designs shows sensitivity training can be and generally is an effective learning mechanism, and deserves a place in management development strategies. See: Edgar H. Schein and Warren G. Bennis, Personal and Organizational Change Through Group Methods *op. cit.*, pp. 9 and 20; Chris Argyris, "T-Groups for Organizational Effectiveness," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 42, Mar.-Apr. 1964, p. 66-67; Barry I. Oshrey and Roger Harrison, "Transfer from Here-and-Now to There-and-Then: Changes in Organizational Problem Diagnosis Stemming from T-Group Training," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1966, p. 185.

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