Planned Change through Laboratory Methods

toward building organizations to order

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This article highlights the results of two efforts to change organization climate by the use of the laboratory approach. Following Tagiuri, "climate" is defined here as "the relatively enduring quality of the total environment that (a) is experienced by the occupants, (b) influences their behavior, and (c) can be described in terms of the values of a particular set of characteristics (or attributes) of the environment."[1]

The change-targets were two populations of marketing managers, one population of 15 and the other of nearly 50 managers. The two managerial populations worked in organization units that are distinguished as "growth-oriented" and "stability-oriented," respectively. The pattern of changes was essentially the same in both cases, but more pronounced changes occurred among the managers from growth-oriented units. Both kinds of effects were expected.

Time-Series Design

This article is limited in a number of senses. First, only a sketch of the learning design is provided. Further detail can be found in an earlier issue of this *Journal.*[2] Second, this article summarizes the thrust of two published pieces, as well as two long, unpublished papers.[3] Nuances in the data consequently cannot receive due attention. Interested readers can obtain the full reports from the authors. Third, the major limit inheres in the lack of control groups in the research design. The design in this case is a modified time-series design, which does not eliminate as many alternative explanations of results as does the control-group design.[4]

These limits are not deemed invalidating, but they do imply the usual state-of-the-art reservations appropriate to developing areas of concern. Despite the unavoidable lack of control groups, for example, the results strongly suggest that they are products of the training design rather than of the passage of time or some other cause. Despite these limits, the data imply real progress toward the goal of building organizations that are built-to-order in the sense of having climates that their members consider desirable.

Laboratory Approach

In overview, the "laboratory approach to planned change" or the "laboratory model" rests on a relatively specific set of values, attitudes and behavioral skills that are ideals to be approached in interpersonal and intergroup relations.

In short, the laboratory model is overtly value-filled, not value-neutral. The values, attitudes and behavioral skills appropriate to the laboratory model cannot be spelled out here. But the two columns below provide a useful sketch of how the laboratory model is value-filled:

Proximate Goals of Lab Approach

1. **Increased insight, self-knowledge**
2. **Sharpened diagnostic skills at (ideally) all levels, that is, on the levels of the**
   - **a. individual**
   - **b. group**
   - **c. organization**
   - **d. society**
3. **Awareness of, and skill-practice in creating, conditions of effective functioning at (ideally) all levels**
4. **Testing self-concepts and skills in interpersonal situations**
5. **Increased capacity to be open, to accept feeling of self and others, and to risk interpersonally in rewarding ways**

Rationale for Planned Change

The rationale for the laboratory approach to planned change in organizations rests on a basic premise. Directly, it is both useful and possible to develop conditions at work such that individual needs and organization demands can become increasingly congruent. This premise does not imply a pollyannish neglect of those many factors in organizations that can frustrate individual needs. These factors do exist, and will continue to exist. However, we can do more than is normally done to increase the congruence between what individuals want and what their organizations demand of them. It is this goal of doing more than is normally done that inspires the present learning design.

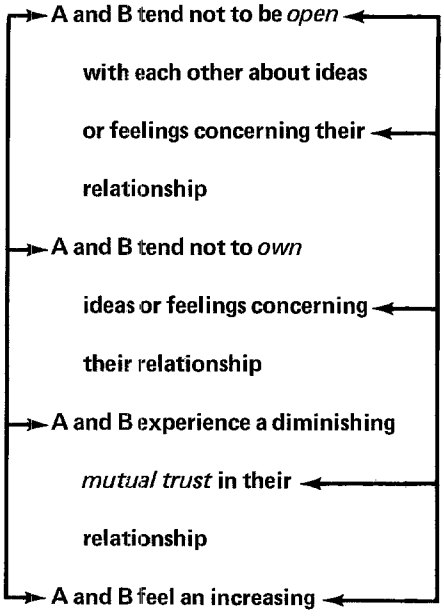
There are many ways of illustrating the usefulness of intentionally increasing the congruence of individual needs and organization demands, no one of them entirely satisfactory. For present purposes, both individuals and organizations can be shown to have a common stake in developing what will be called "regenerative communication sequences." Or to say much the same thing, both individuals and organizations have a significant stake in avoiding degenerative communication sequences or, once they have developed, in reversing them.

Organization Values Consistent With Lab Approach

1. **Full and free communication**
2. **Reliance on open consensus in managing conflict, as opposed to using coercion or compromise**
3. **Influence based on competence rather than on personal whim or formal power**
4. **Expression of emotional as well as task-oriented behavior**
5. **Acceptance of conflict between the individual and his organization, to be coped with willingly, openly and rationally**

The significance to individuals of degenerative communication sequences may be illustrated briefly. Figure 1 depicts such a sequence as a circular model with four elements that are mutually heightening. Only the distinction between being "open" and "owning" needs to be explicitly made. Assume A says to B: "Some people feel you are unscrupulous." If some people do in fact feel that way, A is being open. But if A is one of those people, he is not owning up to his reactions about B.

Figure 1.
A Typical Degenerative Community Sequence Between Individuals



Degenerative Sequence Effects

What is there to chose between these two idealized communication sequences? Individuals need relationships that are honest, caring and non-manipulative, to make the point one way. Hence their needs tend to be deprived by degenerative communication sequences, which are non-honest, non-caring and usually manipulative in effect if not always in intention. Individuals have their needs frustrated by degenerative sequences, to approach the point in another way, because once caught in such a sequence you often can't win for losing.

A degenerative communication sequence is circular and self-heightening so that, for example, when trust is low even authentic openness tends to be misperceived as dishonest or manipulative. Of course, such misperception tends to lower the trust still further. The circularity is even more diabolical because it encourages self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, if I perceive others as initially hostile-in-intention, I am likely to act toward them in ways that encourage their hostility-in-fact toward me. The effect is likely even in those cases where I see initial hostility where none existed. This sketches a sad game that people often play.

The circularity of degenerative communication sequences tends toward a common outcome. Individuals feel diminished and demeaned as persons, enmeshed in an increasingly inauthentic relationship in which it is difficult or impossible to make desired outcomes happen. A person in a degenerative communication sequence is like the unlucky soul in quicksand. The more he struggles, the worse things are likely to become. Consider the case of the husband in a degenerative sequence with his wife. He buys some flowers on returning from a

business trip, as an introduction to being open about and owning up to his tender feelings about her. If the sequence has degenerated far enough, the wife's reaction to the flowers is: "Well, what have you been up to now?" And such a response will escalate the relationship to more intensely unforgiving levels.

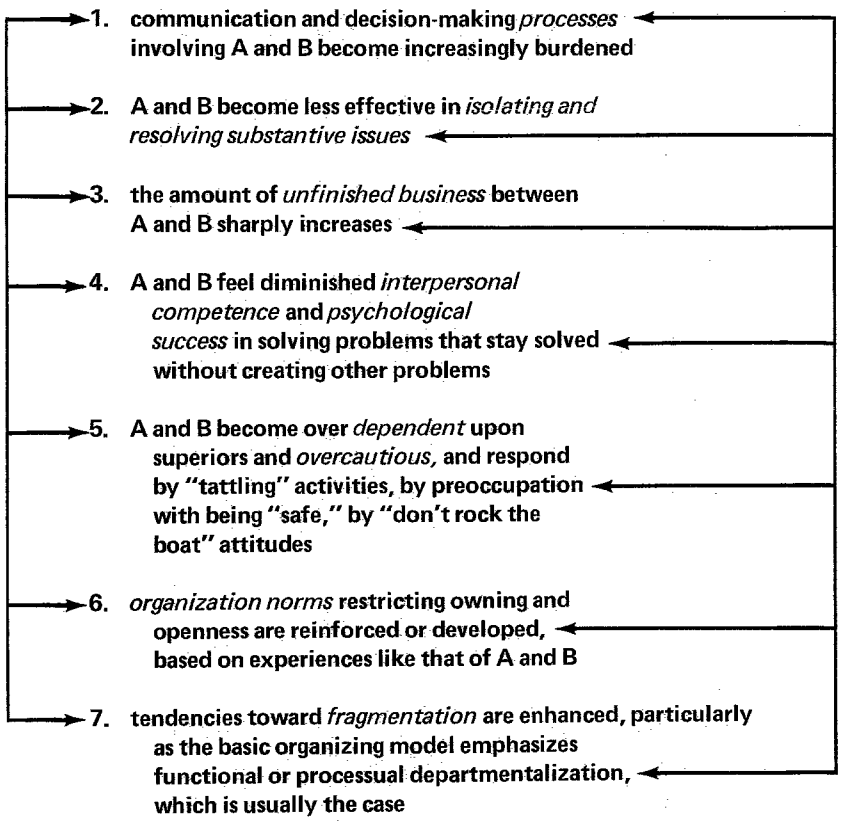
Regenerative Sequences

These few comments suggest the significant stake that individuals should feel in the quality of their communication sequences. The ideal is a life-space characterized by regenerative sequences in which, almost literally, the individual can't lose for winning. Even when things go badly wrong, illustratively, the individual in a regenerative sequence is in a better situation to cope successfully and hence to enhance his self-esteem and that of others with whom he interacts. He has better information about problems and about his efforts to cope with them; and he has the trust of others to help him over the rough spots.

The significant stake that organizations have in carefully managing such degenerative communication sequences is implied in Figure 2. That figure does not chart inevitabilities, of course. Nor does it specify the point at which degenerative sequences between individuals begin to induce organizational outcomes like those sketched in Figure 2. But those outcomes are serious enough, and common enough, to imply the clear organizational stake in avoiding or reversing degenerative communication sequences between individuals.

Figure 2.

Some Typical Organizational Outcomes of Degenerative Communication Sequences



The Learning Design

The rationale above for the laboratory approach to planned change inspired a learning design which seeks to reverse degenerative communication sequences, as well as to reinforce regenerative communication sequences. This design has three basic elements. First, members of small organization units are provided with an off-site learning experience that centers around values, attitudes and behavioral skills appropriate for avoiding or reversing degenerative communication sequences. The off-site learning experience utilizes "sensitivity training" or "T-grouping" in small groups composed of peers who work together.

Second, immediately after the initial experience, the design begins to extend the learning gained in small groups into the larger workaday organization. Such extensions are variously encouraged, as by permitting organizational peers to confront their hierarchical superiors as a test of the values, attitudes and behavioral skills reinforced or developed in the initial training. "Confronting," in the present sense, involves four elements that are the focal points in the initial training:

1. to be in touch with one's feelings, reactions or ideas;
2. to be able to identify the stimuli which induce specific feelings, reactions or ideas;
3. to develop relations of trust that permit individuals to express their feelings, reactions or ideas; and
4. to express one's feelings, reactions or ideas while encouraging others to do likewise.

In sum, the initial two phases of the learning design provide experi-

ence with relevant values and skills, whose transfer to relations at work is tested in work-related confrontations between organizational superiors and subordinates.

Third, the learning design calls for a "reinforcement experience" some 9-12 months after the initiation of the program of change. The intention is to provide a kind of "booster shot" for the values, attitudes and behavioral skills that were developed or reinforced in the two earlier training phases. The reinforcement experience typically lasts a day or more. It focuses on the progress that has been made toward the ideals of the laboratory model to that point, as well as on what can be done in the future to sustain or extend that progress.

Targets for Change

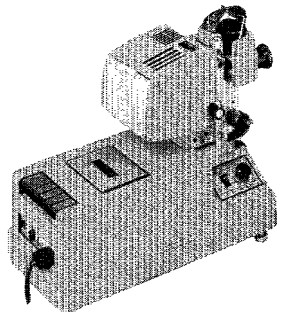
The ability of the learning design sketched above to induce changes in interpersonal and intergroup relations appropriate for more effectively meeting individual needs and organization demands was tested in two kinds of small organization units. Table I broadly distinguishes their two sets of properties. The general expectation is that the Growth-Oriented Units will change more markedly than the Stability-Oriented Units. Specifically, the learning design was expected to induce similar patterns of change in interpersonal and intergroup relations in the two types of organization units, but greater magnitudes of change were expected in the Growth-Oriented Units.

Table I.

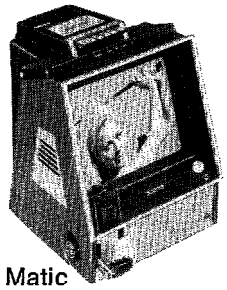
Two Contrasting Types of Organization Units

Growth-Oriented Units	Stability-Oriented Units
1. short organizational histories	1. several decades of organizational history
2. marked flexibility in policies and procedures	2. traditional policies and procedures
3. product lines that are new in markets that are sharply expanding	3. product lines that are aging in markets that are "mature" and perhaps declining
4. profit opportunities are attractive	4. profit opportunities still good, but declining, and perhaps precipitously so
5. substantial growth in personnel and expanding opportunities for promotion	5. substantial reductions in personnel will occur, hopefully by attrition only, and opportunities for promotion are few
6. of apparently-growing present and future importance to parent corporation	6. traditionally the source of corporate leadership, but units may play lesser role in corporation of the future
7. look forward to continued growth	7. seek stability or even a gentle decline

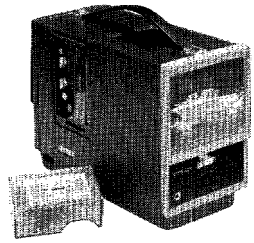
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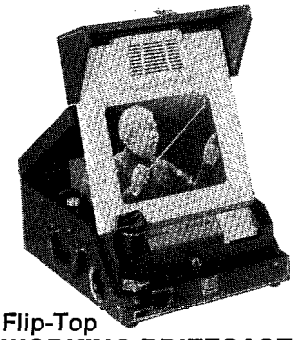
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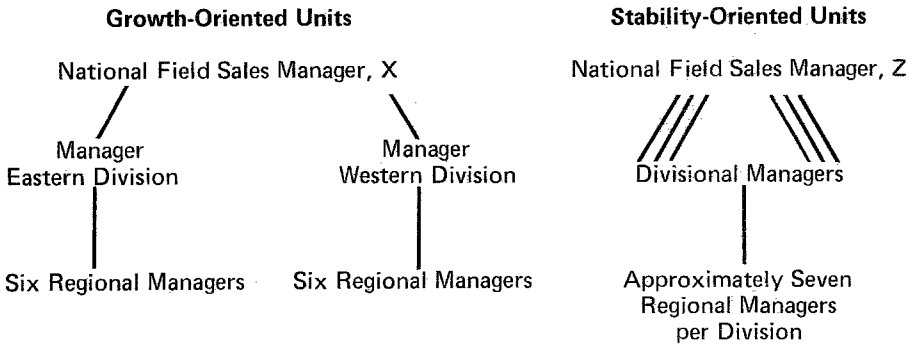
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The rationale for the expected difference in change can be illustrated briefly. In essence, the Stability-Oriented Units were seen as facing more intense degenerative communication sequences and, in effect, the training design in these units consequently had to swim against their tide. For example, the learning design could successfully highlight the usefulness of high trust and low risk. But the environment would keep generating unavoidable concerns in Stability-Oriented Units that served to lower trust and increase risk, as in the threat that reductions in manpower above and beyond normal attrition would be made.

Being "safe" and not "rocking the boat" would be more likely in Stability-Oriented Units, then, with the prime consequence of making even more difficult what at best would be a major adjustment to changing market conditions. Growth-Oriented Units would not be without their own problems, of course, but they did not face such dismal inevitabilities or probabilities.

There were eight experimental units altogether, all engaged in marketing activities in two separate areas of the same large firm. Each unit was composed of six to 10 managers, with two units being Growth-Oriented and six being Stability-Oriented. The two batches of units each comprised a broader organization unit, as below:



The training design was extended level-by-level. The details of the training design resemble a complex Chinese laundry ticket, but their thrust can be outlined economically. Globally, the acceptability of the laboratory approach to planned change was variously tested at a variety of organization levels above the two "systems" whose climates were to be changed, National Field Sales Managers X and Z. The initial learning of relevance here took place in sub-systemic groups of peers, e.g., the group of six regional managers in the Eastern Division. The T-Group was the basic training vehicle in this first stage, and the primary goal was to provide the managers with a learning experience that emphasized the values, attitudes and behavioral skills appropriate for inducing:

high levels of openness;
high levels of owning;
high levels of mutual trust; and
low levels of perceived risk.

Extensions of this learning then were tested as subordinates confronted their immediate superiors. For example, each group of regional managers in the Stability-Oriented Units confronted its divisional manager as well as the National Sales Manager, Z, with the focus on work-related concerns. The common goal of the initial learning, whose testing was begun by the confrontations, was to change the system-wide climate of interpersonal and intergroup relations of each of the broad organization units presided over by the two national sales managers. The intended approach was to transfer into the broad organization contexts the values, attitudes and behavioral skills that were developed in the small units during the initial training phase.

The design involved nothing less than the building of a new social order, in effect, complete with supporting norms and behavioral skills.

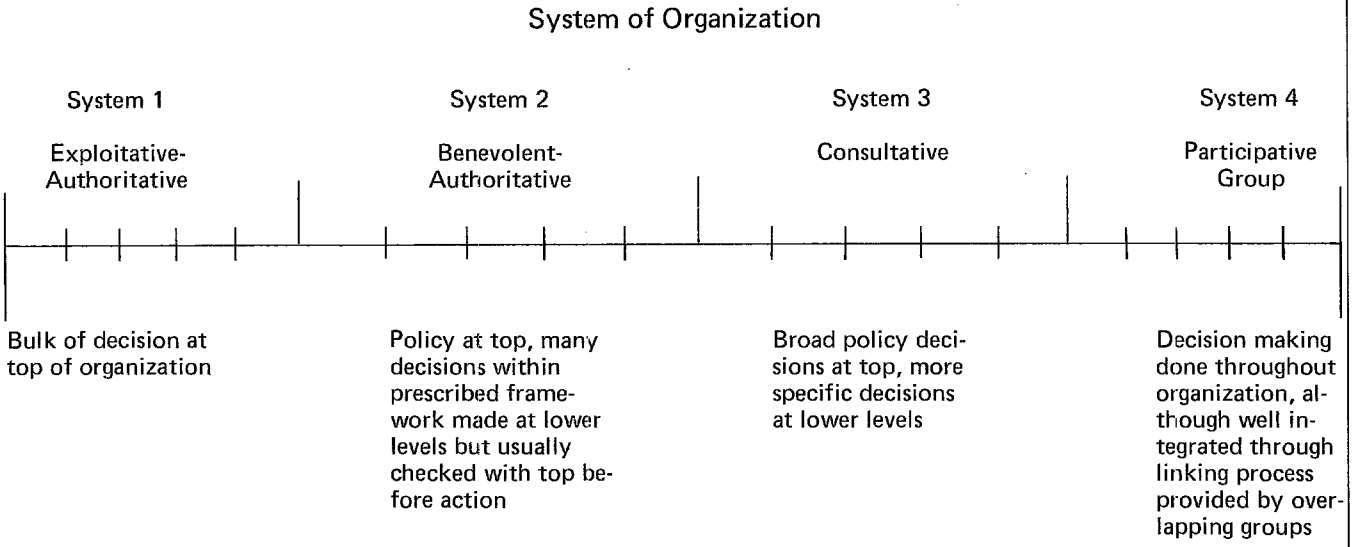
Measuring Planned Change

The degree of systemic change induced by the learning design was measured with managerial self-reports on the Likert Profile of Organization Characteristics.[5] Managers in the Growth-Oriented Units rated one form of the Profile four times over an 18-month period; and managers from Stability-Oriented Units responded to a shorter form of the Profile six times over a 245-day interval. In all cases, respondents were instructed to keep their total marketing system in mind when responding to the Likert Profile. The Reference Organization in each case is the system "National Field Sales."

The Likert Profile taps six basic organizational processes, and attempts to characterize an organization in terms of four systems of management on each Profile item. The six processes deal with: Leadership; Motivation; Communication; Decisions; Control; and Goals. Several Profile items deal with each of these basic processes, with each item being anchored by four descriptive statements that provide a working description of each of the four systems of organization. Figure 3 illustrates these properties with one Profile item.

Two additional points about the Profile deserve note. First, a System 4 Organization is assumed

Figure 3.
An Illustrative Item from Likert's Profile of Organizational Characteristics



Item 33. At what level in the organization are decisions formally made?

to be most consistent with the values of the laboratory approach sketched above. Hence also a System 4 Organization should both induce and require regenerative communication sequences more than the other systems.

"Now" and "Ideal"

Second, the summary below of the results of the program of planned change will take advantage of an interesting property of the Likert Profile. That is, each Profile item can be rated as Now and as Ideal. This permits useful contrasts of preferred and existing organization relations. Requests for Now scores direct the rater to respond as to where he then perceives the Reference Organization as being on each item; and the Ideal scores in effect ask the rater where he would prefer the Reference Organization to be on each item.

The assumptions underlying the use of the Likert Profile are direct, and can be spelled out briefly. First, System 4 organizations imply values, attitudes and behavioral skills that are most consistent with the laboratory approach to planned change in organizations. Hence the success of the present program of planned organizational change can be defined in terms of movement toward System 4 ratings. Second, System 4 ratings on the Likert Profile are most likely to induce *re*generative, and to reverse or limit *de*generative, communication sequences. Third, System 4 ratings imply a greater congruence of individual needs and organization demands than do the other three systems of organization in the Likert schema.

Some Results

Managerial responses to the Likert Profile indicate that the learning design had the anticipated effects on interpersonal and intergroup relations in both kinds of organization units. These results come from two separate sets of studies, with somewhat different research designs and measuring instruments. The differences are mostly minor and technical in nature, and can be neglected here.

The results from the two studies can be highlighted in terms of five emphases. For convenience, the results will be reported in terms of the following conventions. Changes in managerial self-reports toward a System 4 Organization will be referred to as "increases," "positive" changes or "changes toward the laboratory model." Changes trending toward System 1 will be referred to as "decreases," or "negative" changes or "changes away from the laboratory model."

First, managers in both kinds of units preferred a System 4 organization but acknowledged working under other systems. The conclusion can be illustrated by the Growth-Oriented Units. In comparisons of 48 items, Ideal scores on the first administration of the Profile were in all cases greater than Now scores. Forty-three of the 48 cases showed statistically-significant differences, in fact. To a similar point, the mean Ideal scores were in System 4 and the

mean Now scores in low System 3. In sum,

Profile Scores

System	Ideal	Now
1. Exploitative-Authoritative	0	0
2. Benevolent-Authoritative	0	1
3. Consultative	3	41
4. Participative Group	45	6

These data establish that managers desired more System 4 properties at work than their organizations in fact provided. The pattern is similar for the Stability-Oriented Units although flat comparisons, for a variety of technical reasons, are more difficult to make.

Second, the learning in T-Groups apparently was both impactful and was extended to relations at work, judging from changes in responses to the Likert Profile in the first administration following each initial training experience. As expected, the change is more dramatic for the Growth-Oriented Units. This difference may be due to factors in addition to the expected greater difficulty of inducing change in the Stability-Oriented Units, however. Thus first post-training measures were some four months after the initial training in the case of the former units, while the interval was only 20 to 30 days for the latter units.

Common Pattern Reflected

The data clearly reflect a common pattern of changes in existing interpersonal and intergroup relations for both kinds of units, while the magnitudes of change apparently differed. Changes in Now scores, of course, measure changes in the existing relations. In the Growth-Oriented Units, managerial self-reports revealed a very sharp change toward System 4, that is, toward an organization style consistent with the laboratory approach. In 48 comparisons of pre-treatment with post-treatment scores, specifically, expected increases occurred in 47 cases. And 28 of these cases reach the .05 level of statistical significance, or better. This is a most impressive evidence of systemic change.

For the Stability-Oriented Units, the pattern of change was dominantly the same, although few changes achieved statistical significance. Specifically, 82 per cent of the self-ratings on Now scores increased in the interval between the pre-test and the administration of the Likert Profile immediately following the training intervention. However, only less than four per cent of these increases attained the statistical significant, and some of the increases were small.[6]

The Ideal scores in both kinds of units changed pretty much as did the Now scores, in the first self-rating on the Profile following the initial training experience. A pattern of rising expectations had been set in motion by the training design, consequently. Managers were demanding even more gratification of their needs at work while they reported that the style of their relations at work was in fact becoming more need-gratifying.

Change Toward System 4

In sum, the pattern is one of overwhelming change in existing relations toward System 4. The initial training experience had the intended effects, although their magnitudes clearly differed.

Third, some decay of the levels of change in both kinds of organization units did occur following the initial spurt of changes, but most of the gain was retained. This implies a mostly-successful testing in the broader system of the initial learning, a two-steps-forward-one-step-back that suggests an incremental pattern of learning or change. A variety of considerations, practical and theoretical, led to a prediction that this learning fade-out would occur.

A pattern of modest regression effects both Now and Ideal scores, but the former apparently more than the latter. Consider the Stability-Oriented Units. About two months after the initial training experience, a modest regression in the self-ratings was observed. On the Now scores, self-ratings trended negatively in about 50 per cent of the cases. Some 35 per cent of the Ideal scores also trended negatively. None of these regressive changes attained statistical significance. These changes away from System 4 eroded only part of the positive changes apparently induced by the learning design.

About eight months into the program of change, despite the regression and before any additional planned training inputs were made, about 70 per cent of the changes in scores from managers in the Stability-Oriented Units still show increases over the set of self-ratings immediately preceding the initial training experience. Only six per cent of these cases achieve statistical significance, but they are all changes toward System 4.

The Growth-Oriented Units showed an even more marked tendency to retain the initial movement toward System 4 on both Now and Ideal scores. Approximately 12 months after the initial training, more than 86 per cent of the self-ratings approached System 4 more closely than did the scores immediately before the initial training. Some 30 per cent of these changes still

retained statistical significance. Only 1.1 per cent of the changes were toward System 1, impressively, despite some rocky intervening organizational history. None of these negative changes attained statistical significance.

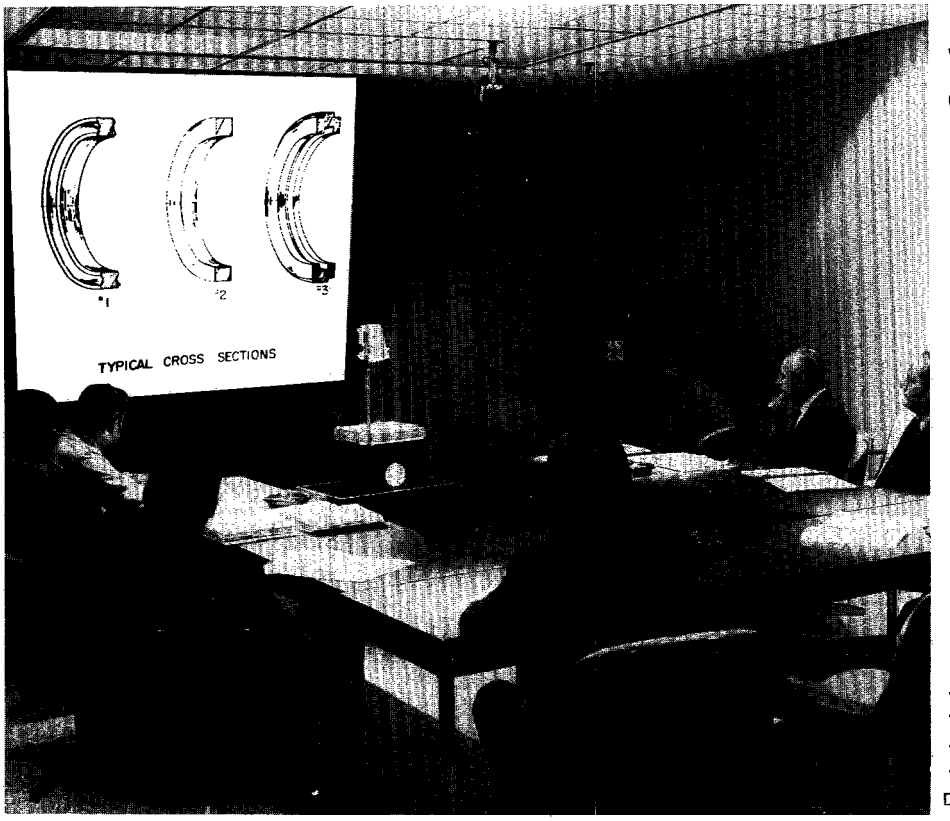
"Reinforcement Experience" Useful

Fourth, a specific "reinforcement experience" proved useful for reversing or at least arresting the fade-out of changes in interpersonal and intergroup relations. Such reinforcement was programmed about a year after the initial training. Several reinforcement experiences have been designed, all with three common objectives: to permit trainees to review their relative success in behaving consistently with the values of the laboratory approach, to reassess their committment to those values, and to plan for the future.

The changes in managerial self-ratings that follow a reinforcement experience strongly imply its ability to arrest learning fade-out, again more so in the Growth-Oriented Units. In the Stability-Oriented Units, to sample the data, an overwhelmingly positive pattern of change was observed in the self-ratings immediately before the reinforcement experience and those approximately 30 days later. Specifically, almost 80 per cent of the changes in Now scores following the reinforcement experience were positive. About 65 per cent of the changes in Ideal scores also were positive. Only a handful of these changes attained usually-accepted levels of statistical significance.

No direct comparison is possible with the Growth-Oriented Units, but the reinforcement experience also clearly had a major impact on them. As the summary data below reflect, the full observational period can be characterized in terms of three phases. First, in column (1), a massive change in self-ratings follows the initial training experience. Second, column (2) reflects a significant regression in which almost three-quarters of the scores decrease. This regression was substantial, but it eroded only part of the change toward the lab approach that was induced by the initial training experience.

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Erosion Evidence

As the most prominent evidence of this partial erosion, note that in column (1) more than 56 per cent of the changes *toward* the lab approach were statistically significant. In contrast, less than 10 per cent of the changes *away from* the lab approach in column (2) were statistically significant. Third, following the reinforcement experience, the regression was reversed and scores are virtually back to the very high level immediately following the initial learning experiences, as column (3) shows.

NOW SCORES ONLY

	(1) Rating After Initial Training vs. First Rating	(2) Third Rating vs. Rating After Initial Training	(3) Rating After Reinforcement vs. First Rating
Statistically Significant Changes Toward Lab Approach	56.3%	0.0%	35.4%
Changes Toward Lab Approach	39.5	23.0	43.8
No Changes	0.0	2.1	6.3
Changes Away From Lab Approach	4.2	66.5	14.6
Statistically Significant Changes Away From Lab Approach	0.0	8.4	0.0
	100.0%	100.0%	100.1%

Fifth, the reinforced changes in the style of interpersonal and intergroup relations tend to persist over extended periods. The record of the Growth-Oriented Units is illustrative. Comparisons of the self-ratings on the Likert Profile before the training experience with the last self-ratings 18 months later establish both the definite pattern and the substantial magnitude of the changes that persisted over the full period of observation. In summary form, using percentages:

	(1) Now Scores	(2) Ideal Scores
Statistically Significant Changes Toward Lab Approach	35.4%	50.0%
Changes Toward Lab Approach	43.8	39.6
No Changes	6.3	6.3
Changes Away From Lab Model	14.6	4.1
Statistically Significant Changes Away From Lab Model	0.0	0.0
	100.1%	100.0%

The pattern was similar in the Stability-Oriented Units, but the magnitudes of change were smaller. The observational period was approximately 10 months. Again comparing the last self-rating with the one immediately before the initial training experience, 88 per cent of the changes in Now and Ideal scores show increases. For Growth-Oriented Units the corresponding figure was 84.4 per cent, which is not very different. Only six per cent of the changes in Stability-Oriented Units attain usually-accepted levels of statistical significance, however. For the Growth-Oriented Units, in contrast, between 35 and 50 per cent of the changes in scores retained statistical significance after 18 months.

Summary

In conclusion, the heavy preponderance of evidence implies the efficacy of the training design in inducing marked and persisting changes in the style of interpersonal and intergroup relations.

This conclusion is tentative, of course, and awaits further needed testing. In the case of the Growth-Oriented Units, however, the pattern of change is so consistent and the magnitudes are so great that the effects can hardly be considered random. For the Stability-Oriented Units, the dominant pattern of change is similar. However, the magnitudes are small enough to require the caution that the effects may be due to random causes rather than to the training design interacting with the specific type of organization unit. These authors feel more comfortable in attributing the reduced magnitudes of change to the character of the Stability-Oriented Units, as opposed to random forces that somehow trended to such a definite pattern.

Whatever future research shows, the possibilities are exciting. It is

still too early to build organizations to order. But results like those above, and similar findings,[7] imply that the science/art of planned change in organizations has developed sufficiently to provide major hope that individual needs can be made more congruent with organization demands. At the risk of being melodramatic, in any case, the view here is that the success in increasing this congruence in organizations will significantly determine the degree of freedom that man will experience in contemporary life.

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