

TECH TRAINING: "GETTING AT THE ROOTS"

BY DUGAN
LAIRD

By definition training is an acquisition system by which people acquire knowledge and skills they didn't previously possess. There is thus for the technical and skills training profession tremendous satisfaction of being basic, of being necessary, or being relevant . . . of getting at the *roots*.

If it also seems *limiting*, just consider the scope of the enterprise. A recent department of labor publication listed 2,100 separate occupations. Incidentally, it also includes 21,000 definitions of the terms. So *don't feel limited*: That's a lot of occupations and an incredibly profuse vocabulary. It's fun to note that the book costs \$5.00 and weighs 12 pounds. All that wordage and all that poundage just to describe the legitimate sphere of activity for a technical and skills training function!

Yes, technical and skills training is a great big field — a complex field. When the Conference Board, Carnegie Corp. and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund recently issued

a survey of 7,500 private corporations, they found that 54 percent offer functional/technical training. This accounts for just 42 percent of their total annual investment of \$2 billion. Translated, these 7,500 companies invest \$860 million a year in technical/skills training.

My point is not that this energy for technical/skills training exists; or that it's big. Rather that we should be proud of it . . . proud of being enlisted in the roots.

We need make no apologies to anybody anywhere for caring deeply about showing people how to do their work. There is the myth that of the three activities, training, education and development, training is somehow the country cousin, the dull-but-necessary, the two-headed idiot brother we wish we didn't have to account for. It is somehow more blessed to do management development. On this issue, listen to B.F. Skinner — something of an authority about education. When once asked to distinguish between training and education, Skinner said something like this: "Training has always been associated with learning to do a

job, with tasks. Education concerns itself with trends and theories. What it probably boils down to is that when you know what you're doing, you're training: When you're not quite sure what you're doing, that's education."

Which gets me to the definition in this impressive brochure I received from the Technical and Skills Training Division of ASTD . . . sort of the birth announcement of the division we recognize today: Technical and skills training may "pertain to all types of 'hands-on' crafts, techniques, methods, arts and professional ability, including basic human relations skills."

Do I detect a wistfulness there . . . with the inclusion of that last phrase, ". . . including basic human relations training"? Now I have no quarrel with human relations training; I'm sure there's good reason for the phrase in the brochure, it's just that I want to say that we need apologize to nobody for concentrating on helping people learn to do their *work*.

We're at the heart of America when we do that, and I could labor proudly for a division which did

nothing else than make good on another statement from that same brochure: "technical and skills are concerned with efficiency of production." Amen!

So let's review the data. Fifty-four percent of those 7,500 companies have technical/skills training, but 60 percent have management development. We need *both*, but there may be evidence that as an occupation we have become preoccupied with the grander abstractions of interpersonal, organizational and management education.

Do you need an example? Within the last year a vice-president of a major *motor* manufacturer boasted: "We have 1,500 full-time trainers, plus many part-time on-the-job trainers. Virtually none of our training is remedial, but ongoing management development has become the name of the game in our company." About the time this pious statement appeared, that same auto manufacturer recalled 2.2 million automobiles from their previous year's models. By my mathematics, that amounts to 1,466 cars per full-time trainer. How can you boast about having no remedial training when your quality record is that awful?

The study by the Conference Board-Carnegie-Rockefeller group showed that eight percent of the \$2 billion went to remedial training. Now this could indicate that only 92 percent of our skills and technical training worked the first time. That's better than the auto manufacturer — but is it good enough?

As trainers, our security rests in producing people who can do their work properly. We can meet it well, this stated goal of "efficiency of production." Let me brag about just one such case: This department store chain was installing a new computerized cash register on a store-by-store basis. The training manager vowed that she would cut the time required to learn the machine by 25 percent and keep perfect sales slips at 85 percent. By carefully testing and evaluating the training program, she actually achieved 95 percent perfection in 75 percent of the time required when the training started in the first stores. This meant huge sav-

ings — not to mention perfect pricing for that 10 percent of their customers whose sales slips would otherwise have required follow-up — a form of "recall."

Because the things we help people learn *matter* — really matter — to the organizations which pay our salaries, we are indeed at the heart, the true roots of what training is all about. Let's be proud of that task . . . proud to serve a market that is more than merely vast; it's a critically important market.

The Quest for Professionalism

And that gets us to the next issue: The profession. Let's be true professionals, not hit-and-miss trainers. We can justify our existence and enshrine ourselves in the gratitude of our organizations and of our nation if we simply become truly professional training specialists. There are several things to consider in this quest for professionalism.

First, we need to remember that the trainees in our learning systems are adults — not children. They weren't born yesterday — and they know that. Nothing shows our amateurism more quickly than to ignore this maturity, to neglect the inventory of knowledge and skill they bring with them to the learning experience. To ignore their inventory is to fall victim to what I've come to call the "on switch syndrome." Here's what I am talking about.

Ever since World War II we've used job instruction training (JIT) when teaching people how to do their jobs. It's been a wonderful vehicle. It's hard to imagine a more sensible or a more productive formula than to *tell* them how, to *show* them how, to let them *do* it themselves, and to *review* their achievements and shortcomings. But we don't always use the four-step process as if the "they" were grown men and women. Thus the "on switch syndrome." I can characterize it better than I can define it, so let me be an on-the-job trainer who has fallen victim. He says something like . . .

"Now this here is your collating machine. For your collating machine to collate, you gotta have

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The JIT formula of tell-show-do-review offers another potential pitfall. I stress the word "potential" because we need not be entrapped. The pitfall is simply that the "do" step comes so awfully late. Adults, certainly the adults we're developing in our society nowadays, want to do things right away. It's the Anacin syndrome: "Please, mother, I'd rather do it myself!"

Nor is it just that they *want* to do things sooner — they've *done* things sooner. Or have you noticed? Of course we didn't have sex education when I was in school, and to my knowledge they haven't

yet installed skills practice in sex education programs, but I have the distinct impression that our younger employees are skilled at activities I still can't even define.

I jest about a serious point. These young employees can do a great deal . . . our old-timers can also do a great deal . . . which we insist upon telling and showing to the point of exasperation. It's so simple to combine the show and tell into a single stimulus (in management training they now call this "behavior modelling," and act as if they'd discovered a whole new learning method, when all they're doing is applying to interpersonal skills the same thing our good JITers have been doing since the 1940s). The professional skills trainer gets data about the learner's inventory, and finds ways to let the learner invest that inventory by doing something at the earliest possible moment.

A third mark of professionalism relates very closely to overcoming the on-switch syndrome and to in-

cluding an early "do" in skills training. It's to devise steady and appropriate feedback opportunities in the entire learning process, so as they do things, learners give themselves feedback on how often and how well they're doing it correctly.

This brings us to a fourth form of professionalism: The *positive pole syndrome*. We want to reinforce what's right about the learner's work, about the learner's questions. As humans, we often accent the negative: How often have you seen a sign saying "good dogs"? If, as members of the technical and skills training profession, we do indeed get involved in interpersonal skills, I sure hope it starts with becoming masters of reinforcing positively, this goes so much beyond the old adage about honey attracting more flies than vinegar. I've always loathed that saying. Well, I was never very anxious to have a lot of flies crawling around me. But positive reinforcement for people who get a little bit of a job done properly is easily the most productive way to get them to do the rest of the job properly. What we need to do to be truly professional is eliminate the stereotyped old on-the-job-trainer who grumbles "not bad" . . . or who looks down his/her spectacles and says "Welllllll?"

We Must Be Accountable

A fifth element of professionalism is accountability. This gets me to the "work equals learn" policy. What does it mean? Well, it certainly doesn't mean that there can be no fun while learning. Indeed, when learning is fun, it's at its professional best — as long as the fun grows out of the learning and isn't just irrelevant frosting on the curricular cake. What this policy means is quite simple: If the students were at the work position, they would be working — typing letters; but since they are in training, they are supposed to learn something. In other words, the accountability to the organization is not to type letters today, it is to learn the new format in which letters will be typed in the future. If the driver were at the wheel of the truck, the work would be to drive

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it to a certain destination: as a trainee, the accountability is to learn the new defensive driving procedures. The work today is to learn.

Our first accountability is to deliver those behaviors. Our accountability also involves seeing in the front-end analysis that the behaviors we teach will be useful to and reinforced by the organization. Insisting that when people enter training they have reviewed these objectives with their immediate bosses, that they know for sure that those bosses endorse the objectives, will be looking for behaviors and will reinforce them when they see them. We are thus also accountable in yet another significant way: to evaluate ourselves on the achievement of these objectives, not on some silly little happiness index that says our trainees loved us 5, 4, 3, 2 or 1.

May this kind of accountability, shared by us, the management we serve, the immediate managers of our trainees and by our learners characterized our very near future!

Well, we've looked at the present. Now the future. There are some things about the future that we need to talk about. There's some handwriting on the wall, and like much handwriting on the wall, it's Greek to most of us.

For example, we need to talk about better market analysis . . . about insisting upon direct communication with the top management of our organizations so we are absolutely failsafe certain that the behaviors we deliver are behaviors which the organization needs.

This means that they are useful to *our* management — not to some alien management outside our organization. What I'm implying is that our market analysis, as we look at the immediate future, can be deceptive. Just look at the headlines and we get the notion that the future is rosy for skills and technical training. There's such interest in it and such support for it. Why, even the government is getting involved. Hear the headlines: A \$400 million authorization

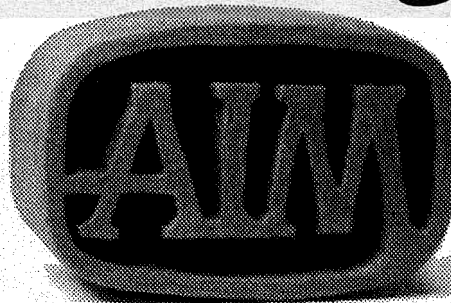
for career education. Just for youth programs, funds have been allocated to the extent of \$1.5 billion. OSHA — and if you still think OSHA is a small town in Wisconsin you are in *big* trouble — offers 90 percent funding for consulting programs to help employers identify and eliminate potential hazards. A recent program for STIP (Skills Training Improvement Program — right out of the focus of this division) rates \$158 million. All these funds make industry's investment of \$860 million look puny — like a mole hill alongside the Rockies. But it proves our government loves us.

A Shadowy Future

But what if S-T-I-P turns out to be P-I-T-S Program for the improvement of technical skills? That's not STIP; it's the PITS.

All these monies come from just one source, the federal government, and that means they are not necessarily good news. In fact, the future to me looks shadowy if we look at the precedents and implica-

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tions of such subsidies.

Precedent number one: The universities who have found that once they accepted federal funds, they became dependent upon that source. Once that dependency was established, the generous uncle from the Potomac became more than the source of funds: He became the source of policy-dictated policy — about faculty, facilities and curriculum. Only a handful of university administrators have recently had the courage to say “thanks, but no thanks; you run your agency and we’ll run our universities.”

Precedent number two: By supplying funds for abortion under certain circumstances, the federal government has, in effect, made a statement about the propriety of abortion and the times when it is proper and the times when it is not. The fact that they have trouble deciding on the propriety doesn’t destroy the fact that women who have become dependent on federal funds to avoid motherhood, currently face the prospect of having no funds to

depend upon.

Let’s not kid ourselves when we get something for nothing, we just haven’t been billed for it yet. Once we grow dependent upon any government for funds for certain skills and technical training, we will be told when we can and how we must train. And they can control us with their funds — and when those funds are withdrawn from programs for which we have developed a dependency, we will abort — whether we want to or not. The Charles Percy’s can tell you that your program doesn’t qualify because it involves something that smacks of sensitivity training; the Barry Goldwaters will be legislating the number and nature of your visual media.

Do I exaggerate? Yes — but far less than you might now be thinking. For years federal agencies have dictated to airlines how long and how often crew training must be — not what competencies it must develop, but how long it must last and how much will take place in classrooms. How much in simulators and how much in cockpits.

Do I exaggerate? Very little. Already the state of California is being told that certain CETA jobs will vanish with the withdrawal of matching funds as a result of curtailments growing out of Proposition 13.

Do I exaggerate? Listen to Jimmy Carter: “We would require states to establish plans to substantially broaden the adult delivery systems to include business, labor unions and community groups.”

Do I exaggerate? ASTD’s *National Report* (May 12, 1978) told us: “Government mandates offshore oil worker training,” and gives details: “Regulations set standards for instructional criteria and levels of qualification. The decisions of whom to train, what to teach and how often to do it are no longer left to the discretion of private industry.”

The Moral . . .

‘Beware of Greeks bearing gifts — especially if them Greeks work for the federal government!

There is a bright ray of sunshine in these threatening clouds. We

can consider the enthusiastic passage of Proposition 13 in California an omen — and it may have come in time to prevent us from developing fatal dependencies. For it definitely *is* an omen. In the federal arena a similar bill is gaining momentum. The Rott-Kemp bill is now in the hopper with bipartisan support: Fifty-five senators and 148 members of the House have come out favoring this bill which would effect reductions in income tax of up to 30 percent. Further fund getting is predictable. And after the California petty politicians get over their initial retributive bitchiness (closing schools for the summer and raising cablecar fares by a quarter) they may just become sufficiently sensitive to their constituents’ position to eliminate some of the really incredible indulgencies — as efforts to prove whether or not Bruce Jenner did indeed grow up on Wheaties. If they respond constructively, we can anticipate systematic, sensible cuts to programs which always have been, and which continue to get ever more anti-enterprise.

It’s mind boggling! We, you and I in the technical and skills training profession, may even live to see the day when the United States returns to a system which rewards people for *working* at least as much as it now rewards them for remaining unemployable!

When every organization, corporate and bureaucratic, when academia and associations offer professional technical and skills training for all their own members, we may again know excellence in the workplace. And that is where it’s at . . . in the workplace.

Dugan Laird, Decatur, Ga., has been active in employee training and development since 1952 when he became an instructor for United Airlines. Later, as a supervisor and training manager, he designed and conducted programs and workshops, finally administering a training function in a data-processing department. He is a consultant, writer, speaker and seminar leader. His most recent book is *Approaches to Training and Development* (Addison-Wesley, 1978). In 1976, the American Society for Training and Development awarded him the Torch Award, and they honored him in 1971 for contributions to the field.

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