

The first in a series of articles on . . .

The Problems Of Conformity

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Modern techniques of training suggest that participation on the one hand and group consensus on the other hand are primary, if not sufficient, tools of successful training programs. The presence today of the various ways in which participation may be obtained and consensus may be a natural result of participation, easily suggest perhaps that the trainer bases much of his training success on group processes rather than subject matter and individual attitudes and learning skills.

We are today becoming increasingly impressed by the tools of participation and group consensus, and some have become so impressed by their value that the training program is measured by the amount of participation, both in terms of quality and perhaps quantity. At the same time we are aware that oftentimes

this index is not a measure of change in attitudes and beliefs on the part of trainees because of the satisfaction that comes from verbalization. A training program with emphasis on participation and group consensus bears the appearance of dignity, individual worth, and responsibility and, because these things are oftentimes conspicuously lacking in the work environment, a training program regardless of its subject matter and leadership can achieve a fair degree of success through participation and group consensus alone.

The author wishes to use this opportunity to write the series for the purpose of discussing the problem of conformity as a concomitant to emphasis on participation and group consensus. When there is strong emphasis on participation and group consensus, conformity of some

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degree will usually ensue. One thing that the trainer almost intuitively knows is that the final accomplishment of group effort is more than and different from the sum of individual efforts. Group effort overcomes the limitation of the individual and through it the ability of each individual is multiplied. The result is almost as if the individual were in different places at once. From this multiplying of effort comes relations and ideas that arise only out of interaction; ideas build upon each other and their telescoping brings a chain reaction that is formidable to the isolated individual. This is the most important guiding principle of group discussion. A unity of action is introduced whereby each individual acts with reference to each other and the subject under discussion.

Training by use of the group discussion process is a form of cooperation of effort by a number of persons for a single over-all purpose. As is the case of all forms of cooperation, group training takes the form of a problem which has two principal parts: the task to be accomplished, such as the subject matter to be discussed, or the case study to be solved; and the fitting of the efforts of the trainees to one another to accomplish the task. It is a prerequisite to successful group training that the task and the necessary steps be a part of the common understanding of the participants. In this sense it can be safely said that the extent to which the participants are skilled in group discussion is an important factor upon which hinges the success of the training program.

Let us look upon group agreement as important not so much because it enhances acceptance but rather because it

is an indication of the reliability of the solution. This feature is one that has been largely overlooked today in our hurry to get acceptance and action from trainees. In scientific method this is called the test of approximate coincidence of observation. This means simply that normal human beings are sufficiently alike to make possible wide areas of agreement within recognizable margins of error due to individual differences. This agreement is an indicator of knowledge that is more reliable than that possible by isolated individuals. Group agreement then is a test of the validity of a solution or answer to a problem or question.

However, the *value* and *trustworthiness* of group consensus and agreement rests on the value and trustworthiness of individual observers and thinkers. Solomon Asch writes in his book, *Social Psychology*, that consensus is valid only to the extent to which each individual observer asserts his own relation to facts and retains his individuality; there can be no genuine agreement about facts or principles unless each adheres to his testimony of his experience and steadfastly maintains his hold on reality. Only if this condition is fulfilled does agreement make its contribution. He goes on to suggest that the group and its consensus are not criteria of truth unless they themselves submit to this condition of validity.

A group discussion that fosters a critical and fearless review of facts and experiences is one thing; a group discussion highly colored by the need for agreement is another—for having to agree, as a group, not only upon a satisfactory solution but upon the nature of

the facts in the case is a complete violation of this condition of validity of group consensus. When a discussion emphasizes the importance of arriving at agreement, either the condition of validity or group agreement is sacrificed.

This opening discussion thus far has suggested two conceptions of agreement; one in which the condition of validity holds and the other in which the condition of getting group agreement holds. When the latter is successfully enforced, subtle tendencies yielding a high degree of conformity are evoked. Conformity, the forces that give use to its prevalence, is the kind of group consensus that we are interested in exploring now in this article. Conformity is a complex in which are subsumed suggestion, imitation, and influence. It is acceptance of a proposition, idea or solution in the absence of logical grounds. It implies the lack of conviction, a blind uncritical acceptance of beliefs and choices. It comes from thoughtlessness, apathy or unreasoning and is synonymous with manipulation.

Oftentimes conformity is euphemistically described as being sensitive to the other man's viewpoint. Conformity as is used herein, tends to go further and to bring individual views into line with those of others without penetrating analysis. Judgment of what is pertinent and what is not pertinent is tied up with the way in which the individual sees the group and how it relates to him. In conformity, then, a pertinent fact is the marriage of what one believes in with what may be acceptable, the emphasis being on the latter.

The irony is that conformity is apparently a function of ceasing to think

about a problem as we would in private. This result of group discussion is one that precludes the group product from being at times superior to what is possible from isolated individuals. Thinking in private is decidedly different from thinking in a social atmosphere, if for no other reason than that we are socially inclined and tend to bring our views out in a friendly and sensitive way. Allport, in studying the relative pleasantness of odors when judged in a group versus an independent situation, found that judgments expressed in the group were generally more guarded; that is, the odors were termed both less pleasant and less unpleasant. This leveling effect was also noted in the judgment of weights. Allport describes it as a basic tendency to temper one's opinion and conduct out of deference to the opinion and conduct of others.

When faced with a group situation, we behave very much as suggested by Whitehead in that we anticipate what the group expects and present facts accordingly. Mere thinking as we would in isolation, regardless of how sensible and critical, usually is not the rule. Asch, in support of this view, describes a group study concerning the length of lines in which every member but one was told to state the wrong length to see whether that one could be persuaded to adjust his answer accordingly. The result was a significant distortion. When the subject was in disagreement with the group, he first disbelieved his own judgment. Then, convinced that he had answered correctly but still at odds with the group, he became emotional and demanded an explanation. Thus the group as an authority, together with the

desire to be "right," caused sufficient pressure that the subject's innate good sense was threatened.

However, the most disturbing phenomenon revealed by this study is the tendency to disclaim error in one's thinking as long as it agrees with the group's. Carried too far, this is unfortunate because of the implication that right and wrong are products of group agreement—that, if the group agrees, the solution reached is necessarily "best" or "right." Unfortunately, company managements sometimes uphold this obvious fallacy even though the same men would abhor it elsewhere.

Sherif was shown that, after an individual persuades a group to support his opinions, the group is reluctant to change even when the individual changes. In other words, pressure to conform induces a form of inertia. Also, Asch has found that group is reluctant to change in the presence of contradictory evidence as long as the members can find support among themselves.

The effect of the group as a modifier of judgments was studied by the author while working with a number of students who were rating the efforts of a machine operator. After each element of the job, the students would call out their effort ratings. If several of the first ratings were fairly close, few subsequent ratings departed from them. If they were widespread, subsequent ratings tended to level out. By dividing the students into two equal groups, it was possible to study the validity of the individual ratings of the first group in relation to those (made subsequently) of the second. The variability of the second

group's ratings was only about half that of the first group's.

One very important thing about conformity is that we seldom know when it is operating. Sherif notes that we are not necessarily aware of being influenced by the group situation or of having a common viewpoint pressed upon us. We may, however, sense on occasion that although we have an inspiration and feel like talking about it, we fail to speak up because someone else already has the floor. We hold the idea in abeyance, and all too often it is forgotten or delayed until it is no longer relevant.

This possibility was brought out by a recent study in which the "pass method" was used to determine how many ideas were held by the members of a particular group yet were not expressed. The "pass method" is a means whereby an individual who does not have the opportunity or desire to speak up during a conference and give pertinent information jots the facts down and either passes them to the conference leader during the meeting or leaves the cards for the conference leader to read afterward. For the purpose of this study, the facts on the cards were not revealed until a subsequent session—at which time the conferees appeared to have changed their views from apparent agreement with the opinion of the group to considerable disagreement. Obviously, those who had seemed to agree during the first session merely went along with the group. Their failure to express themselves prevented the group from reaching a satisfactory decision.

Another potential danger involved in holding a training conference is the pos-

sibility that the decision arrived at will be more—or less—appealing to the conferees when they reflect on it in private. This is an extension of the problem of conformity to include afterthought. Sherif shows that individuals who develop their beliefs independently usually modify them in a group. But more important is his finding that individuals who have first acquired their opinions in a group atmosphere modify them after they have left the group. In both instances, conformity has taken place, though to a considerably greater degree in the latter case.

This may be explained by the everyday situation in which a friend tells us his point of view and we react hesitantly while in his presence only to champion him when we are no longer under his influence. We even tend to state his viewpoint as our own, without properly identifying it. In other words, beliefs are not always leveled in line with those of the group in the presence of the group; this may also occur after the group has disbanded.

Conformity is not always an immediate affair but may sometimes be drawn out, as Asch, Bloch, and Hertzman show in their studies of subjects asked to make judgments concerned, for example, with the nature of photographs. These studies reveal that conformity may be a result of subsequent judgments and that it is not always an immediate affair. However, evidence is insufficient to pinpoint the exact stage in which conformity takes place. One assumption is that the moment we know of a committee meeting or group discussion which we must attend we begin to organize our facts in accordance with our ideas of

who else is likely to be present and what the nature of the discussion will be. If this is true, conformity may extend anywhere from the anticipatory stage to that period where we are once again free of the meeting's influence and can review what happened. We never know definitely when we are conforming. Nevertheless, to ignore the tendency to conform is to ignore the hazard that attends thinking based upon group pressure.

Many training programs—as well as conferences and committee meetings—are attempting to reach group agreement through the use of conformity. In numerous cases, of course, group agreement is desirable because it helps bridge the gap between knowing and doing; and, if everyone agrees on what is to be done, the decision stands a better chance of being carried out than if some members of the group agree and others disagree. Nevertheless, the possibility exists that something may be more important than group agreement—in short, *critical discussions and analysis of the problem*.

However, though uncovering the facts is essential, it still is not the only objective of group discussion. Perhaps even more urgent is the need to develop ability to think critically and penetratingly. Trainers should rebel at the notion, commonly prevailing, that in order to make the individual important he must be allowed to “participate” in the decision-making process and the demands of making a sound decision must therefore be adjusted to give him that opportunity. We today are presently devoted to the word “participate”; perhaps 10 years from now hindsight will suggest that we have made a mistake in not allowing

the individual to exert his own individuality in a situation, to seek the facts regardless of their nature and without the pressure of conformity.

The second article of this series by Professor Jennings, "Marginality, A Force for Group Training?," will appear in the February issue.



The Alabama Industrial Training Association held its quarterly meeting on November 8, 1957 at the Southern Bell Telephone & Telegraph Company in Birmingham and elected chapter officers for 1958: President, Karl D. Klein, Chemstrand Corp., Decatur, Ala.; Vice-President, Ralph E. McAdams, General Electric Co., Anniston, Ala.; Secretary-Treasurer, George W. Robinette, U. S. Post Office, Birmingham, Ala.; and Recording Secretary, Aubrey E. Boyles, Hayes Aircraft Corp., Birmingham, Ala. Members at this meeting in the photo above are (l. to r.): Ralph E. McAdams, (Secretary, AITA), General Electric; Frank L. Bullard, Jr. (Vice-President, AITA), Tennessee Coal & Iron; William O. Etheredge, Tennessee Coal & Iron; John E. Bryan, Jr. (President, AITA), Hayes Aircraft; W. E. Powell, Jr., Southern Bell Telephone; Dalton Howard, Hayes Aircraft; Rex R. Sullivan, University of Alabama; Mrs. Nan H. Raley, Alabama Department Industrial Relations; James H. Beckham, Alabama Power Co.; Ernest Lloyd, Alabama State Employment; L. L. Jackson, Southern Bell Telephone; Hugh G. Harris, Jr., Hayes Aircraft; Roger Vonland, President, Student Chapter, University of Alabama; and E. B. Snell, Southern Natural Gas.