

Experiment in Group Development

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IN THE FIELD of human relations, as in religion, conversions are too often followed by backsliding.

As a group, training directors are well aware that verbal commitment to an idea or philosophy does not always assure that action will "logically" follow. There is a vast difference in learning on the verbal and on the action level. Experience with flip charts, overhead transparent projectors, slide films, movies, demonstration materials and flannel boards has demonstrated that something more basic than getting attention is necessary for learning.

What, then, are the necessary prerequisites for bringing about attitudinal and behavioral changes, not just in terms of techniques of presentation, but also in terms of atmosphere or climate, motivation, involvement, learner participation, and active *learner doing*? Equally important questions, since most of our human relations training is in reference to leadership of groups, are: What goes on in groups? How do group pressures operate? What complex interpersonal relationships facilitate or hinder effective group action, and how do these forces operate?

Western Training Laboratory

It was to provide training along these lines, as well as to provide new research

data that the Western Training Laboratory in Group Development (announced on page 8 of the May-June issue of the *Journal*) was held at Idyllwild, California from August 17 to 29. It is the purpose of this article to report the more significant insights the participants said they gained by the Laboratory experience—insights into the baffling problems of what conditions are necessary for learning, and especially, for learning in relation to the functioning of groups.

Previous Studies

The constantly increasing interest of industrial psychologists, sociologists, educators, and others in problems of interpersonal relations in industry, business, and government attests to an increasing awareness and appreciation of the importance in a democratic society of learning how to release the inherent creative energies within people.

A large number of carefully controlled studies of recent years provides insight into such aspects of group functioning as (1) patterns of supervisory behavior that promote group and individual growth and group productivity, (2) the conditions necessary for social change, and (3) member-member and member-leader relationships. Research activities of The National Training Laboratory in Group Development have contributed to these insights, while training activities

of this Laboratory have attempted to bridge the gap between knowledge and behavior.

Sponsored by University Extension, University of California, Los Angeles, this was the first attempt to make available in the West the sort of laboratory that has been held each summer in Bethel, Maine, since 1947.

The Laboratory Goals

To explain fully the theoretical bases underlying the Western Training Laboratory is beyond the scope of this article. It should be pointed out, however, that lectures constitute but a small part of the total experience. To quote a statement from the Laboratory, "The training program is called . . . 'a laboratory rather than a school or workshop because it serves both research and training purposes, and because the training method consists partly of having groups analyze and experiment with their own processes so that its members may become more sensitive to the forces determining group life and more skilled in techniques for improving group performance' . . . The Laboratory is a social experiment the object of which is to train people in democratic-scientific methods of problem-solving in human relations."

The Laboratory Setup

The seventy-five delegates participating in the Laboratory came from industry, business, government, education, social work, and agriculture. They met in five "training" groups, in the mornings, each with a trainer and a training

associate. Again, in different groupings, they met in nine "skill practice" groups in the afternoons, and, on still a different basis, in fourteen "community" groups in the evenings. In addition, seven general sessions of all delegates and faculty were held, mostly for presentation of theory and reports of experimental studies.

Briefly and inadequately, the "training" group may be described as exploring the dynamics of group life, the things that go on in groups; the "skill" group, as practicing the leader, trainer, chairman, or member skills necessary for effective participation in groups; and the "community" group, as a social group for "bull session", sociability, and "letting off steam."

A total of thirty-two staff members attests to the high degree of on-going planning to meet evolving needs and individual problems and to the small proportion of time spent in lectures.

Results

The take-home benefits that delegates report obtaining from participation in this Laboratory may be listed in two categories: first, specific techniques, and second, understandings, sensitivities, and attitudes.

Group Techniques

Among the interesting techniques was the use of role playing in connection with the film, "The Invisible Committee." The film shows a meeting of five members and a chairman, and in a novel way shows the hidden motivations ("invisible committees") behind

certain members. During the showing the entire assembly was divided into six "buzz groups," each of which was to "identify" with a designated member of the committee. Immediately after the end of the film each "buzz" group met to select a delegate to play the committee member with which it had identified and suggest to him how he might play the part in such a way as to get positive forward moving committee action. All representatives plus the chairman then met on the stage and played their roles. They were all so cooperative, however, that now there was no problem and it seemed rather "flat." Nevertheless, this technique would seem to suggest some interesting possibilities, especially as it gets total participation. (There was no sense of being an "audience.").

Another novel technique grew out of a compromise plan in a "skill" group. Eight members plus a chairman had a list of ten alternatives (not all mutually exclusive) from which to develop an acceptable plan of procedure. First they divided into four groups of two, and developed four plans. Next a leader for each two-group sat with the leader from another two-group and developed a joint plan, the non-leaders sitting by the leader's elbow. Finally a leader from each of the two groups-of-four composed a joint plan, all others being present. This would seem to be a plan worth experimenting with if group consensus can be obtained on the compromises worked out at successive stages.

A way of using a large committee (eighteen members, most of them volunteers) to plan a meeting deserves special mention. Realizing that as an action

committee eighteen members would bog down, they selected by vote a committee of five who sat in the middle doing the planning, with the other thirteen around the outside. Any time the group in the middle felt they wanted the advice of the remaining thirteen they took a recess for that purpose. Thus it was felt that there was maximum communication, permissiveness, and participation consistent with getting action.

Techniques for evaluating groups and discovering possible causes of groups failing to accomplish their goals were provided by the use of group members as observer and as recorder, the observer reporting to the group the various group processes, the roles played by the members, and forces moving the group toward or away from its goal, and the recorder providing not a stenographic report but a brief account of significant happenings.

Group Forces

The most successful theory session was that on force field analysis for analyzing the probable forces for and against a projected course of action. After the theory presentation each "buzz" group (approximately ten to twenty members) analyzed its proposal (each proposal different—participants went to the one they wished) and listed the probable forces favoring, and those opposing, the proposed action. Next, on a rectangular chart they indicated the forces as arrows with points against a line of equilibrium, like the 50-yard line in a football field, the "pros" in one direction, the "cons" in the other, the length of the arrows proportional to the estimated strength.

Great interest was shown in this technique as a means of analyzing and relatively objectifying forces and focusing attention of those concerned with bringing about the change to the places where their energies may be most effectively applied.

The above and other related techniques were felt by the delegates to have provided them with useful knowledge of means for conducting meetings, and for organizing large groups for effective consultation and action—means by which groups can be brought to greater involvement and motivation, and better problem solving ability, productivity, and action.

Attitude Changes

Turning now to the less tangible benefits, several significant understandings, sensitivities, and changes of attitude were reported to have taken place. Having practiced being leader, trainer, chairman, observer, or recorder, and having heard the analysis of one's behavior as it has appeared to others, having a "mirror held up before one" in an experimental laboratory situation, members' reports indicate a heightened sensitivity to processes going on in groups. Some of the dynamics of group action which they reported having become aware of are resistances to bossiness, antagonisms between people, the suspiciousness that can develop when the group is not fully informed of the background of plans developed for it, and frustrations that develop from a lack of a clearly understood and accepted plan.

While this article attempts to assess the more important benefits that the

participants felt they derived, its purpose is in no sense to evaluate the Laboratory. Nor is it to describe all the worth-while techniques and experiences, many of which, even though of undoubted significance and validity, are highly subjective and difficult to verbalize.

Sensitivities

It is believed by the writer that the greatest benefit of the Laboratory experience lies not in the knowledge of specific techniques brought home, but in the beginning awareness and sensitivities that have been opened up, to serve as a basis for continued open-minded exploration, and to encourage attempts to apply democratic processes to group action and growth, and to supervisory development and leadership.

Some of those awarenesses and sensitivities reported by participants include the following:

- Greater sensitivity to what goes on around the conference table.
- "You can't ride blindly over the feelings of other people without getting a reaction."
- Increased flexibility in assessing currently the on-going group process.
- Increased understanding of forces contributing to cohesion, mutual antagonisms, frustration, sense of success, growth, movement, and accomplishment.
- Sensitivity to some of the means, from wit to less disguised catharsis, by which group tensions may be released and greater group involvement and productivity obtained.

- Better understanding of authoritarian leaders.

- Clearer concept of letting ideas come from the group to get maximum development within the group. "I picked up many techniques for doing this."

- How to get conference members to develop into better participants by helping them to understand their roles, and the functions of members and of leaders.

- "Importance of getting people completely sold."

- From an engineer: "I have learned a tremendous amount that engineers don't have time to pick up in school."

- "This has been emotional training as well as being directed at the intellect—double-barreled approach, highly effective."

- A sense of the importance of timing in advancing human relations training—"don't rush in before they are ready."

- An understanding of how persons of varied background can be mixed together for human relations training.

- The overwhelming importance of resistance to change—the threat to security, to one's inner core of perceptions and values posed by the new.

- The importance, in introducing a new idea, of relating it to present frames of reference—(a blending of "the old with the new").

- Practice in isolating, generalizing, and stating problems in such a way as to facilitate group analysis, study, and solution.

Delegate Evaluation

One of the most consistently used devices of the Laboratory was the "feedback" by which the delegates were given a chance on post-meeting evaluation sheets to report to the staff anonymously their individual reactions to the sessions. Toward the end of the Laboratory each delegate was given a chance to state his reactions to the total experience. The objective questions were summarized and fed back to the delegates in the final session.

Among other reactions, delegates overwhelmingly felt that the training and skill sessions met their needs, that the Laboratory dealt with their problems adequately, and that if they "had it to do over again" they would choose to come.

While the above mentioned insights are interesting in themselves and would seem to furnish validation of the Laboratory as a deep learning experience, it is suggested that they are significant also when viewed as insights that the delegates felt to be important. At this juncture, with this Laboratory experience behind them, they feel, so it seems to the writer, that these truths and insights indicate the direction in which we should grow if as members of management we are to improve our leadership skill, or as training directors, our training effectiveness. These factors seem to point also to the important matter of the industrial "climate."

Democratic Leadership

Some attitudes necessary for a climate in which learning can take place were suggested in one of the training groups

as qualities necessary in the leader (or trainer) and seem to the writer to express significantly the essence of democratic leadership and to exemplify this entire Laboratory experience. They are:

- Respect—for the people with whom the leader is working, for their right to be different.
- Acceptance—does not mean he has to agree with their value systems.
- Warmth—a feeling that he *does* care about others.
- Permissiveness—a behavioral attitude which opens the door to participation.
- Understanding—Try to know the other person's perceptions - most important to promoting a learning climate.
- Reflection—the tool to implement these attitudes. It refers to trying to get the meaning of what one says.

Significant for management, and significant to training people would appear the fact that modern research is revealing that these very attitudes, and the techniques and leader sensitivities mentioned above are not only those that best promote a learning climate but also those that largely characterize productive groups. Since learning, change, individual and group growth, inventiveness, self-expression, and cooperation are so closely related in their psychic aspects this should not surprise us.

But it does suggest the beginning of a rationale consistent with the note on which the Laboratory closed, our belief in the validity and vitality of democracy as a rewarding way of life.

Recent ASTD Publications

ASTD publications have been coming out thick and fast! First, came the revised edition of the *ASTD Constitution and By-Laws* in July; second, the *1952 ASTD Directory* in August; and then, in September, the *Digest of ASTD Objectives and Activities*.

The revised edition of the *Constitution and By-Laws* contains these documents in full, with the amendments made at the March, 1952 Business Meeting. We no longer have to dig our way back to the March-April, 1950 issue of the *Journal* to find the Constitution. The *Digest* gives the objectives, organization, present activities and future plans of ASTD. One of its features is the center-page map showing ASTD regions and districts as well as the locations of chapters. Credit these beautifully planned and printed pieces to Elliott French, Chairman of the Public Relations Committee, and to the members of his Committee!

The *1952 ASTD Directory* of 114 pages contains sections on ASTD Officers and District Representatives as well as Chapter Officers. It has a regional map and three listings of ASTD members—an alphabetical list by name, a geographical list and an alphabetical list by company name. Russ Moberly, our Secretary-Treasurer, gets credit for the *Directory*—a tremendous project!

Each of these publications will be a great aid to our old and new affiliated chapters and their members!

Next, The Catalogue of Training Materials will be brought up to date in a supplement to the Nov.-Dec. issue of the *Journal*.