

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

IN DEFENSE OF TRADITIONAL TRAINING

BY ROD BEAULIEU

It depends, of course, on definition and the line one chooses to draw between training and education Time was, in business and industry, when anything resembling formalized learning situations was referred to as *training*; and to this day line managers display a glorious indifference to any distinction between the terms. My hunch is that everyone's experiences are the same as my own. When requests come in, they are for *training* programs regardless of what managers expect to get. (Incidentally, there is some justification for such disdain for terminology. Most programs, whatever they were intended to be, tend to meander back and forth across that hypothetical — and generally meaningless — line.)

It is only in recent years, since the training and education field has largely been treated as occupied territory by the behaviorists, that insistence on precise definitions of training and education has become an issue. And most such folk tend to take a pejorative stance toward anything more complex than that which can be readily duplicated by half-starved rats. Scott Parry (who should know better) recently said, "I won't invest my time in running a dog and pony show that educates but doesn't train." B.F. Skinner (who probably *doesn't* know better) has been quoted as saying, "If you know what you're doing, it's training. If not, it's education." And, of course, the whole move-



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ment has been egged on in the last several years by Bob (you should oughta' wanna') Mager who insists on precise and neatly packaged objectives, activities designed to elicit robotlike responses, and documentable, clinically certified proof of results.

In spite of the obvious bias of the preceding paragraphs, the purpose here is not to perpetuate the ideological guerilla warfare between the operant conditioning people on the one hand, and the Gestaltists on the other. Rather, I should like to see if we can't dilute some of the paranoia that seems to be settling over old-guard traditionalists like myself who continue

to trot out our films, games, exercises, and Sunday morning sermons, while nervously defending our flanks against the panzer thrusts of the instructional technologists and their armies of hungry pigeons.

Need for "Pure" Training

Clearly there is a need for programs that meet any definitions of pure training, particularly when one is dealing in situations of absoluteness where there are only right and wrong ways of doing things. But there is also a place for what I will call traditional training which includes the aforementioned media. There is need, and there is benefit — even with the often imprecise objectives, uncertain and unpredictable responses of trainees, and the extreme difficulty of useful evaluation. How many benefits? Let me count the ways. And in doing so, I'll cheerfully concede I'm drawing on nothing stronger than my own instincts, observations and casual conversations with hundreds of Chrysler managers over more years than I'll own up to.

To begin with, we know that any classroom situation that brings people together can help create a solid *managerial community*. In our own programs we usually have a mixture of people who, although they may work together (sort of), carry on relationships in the stressful, pressure-packed plant environment that are frequently characterized by something less

than harmonious cooperation. Away from the job, freed of the routine tensions, they come to see and know each other in a different light. And all our evidence is that relationships developed in the classroom tend to carry over to the job environment. Not only do the personal relations improve, so does the ability to work together cooperatively.

A second phenomenon that occurs is what I call the *transfer of responsibility*. If one were to conduct a survey of management people as to why they feel they have problems of productivity, quality, safety, housekeeping, grievances, or whatever, a frequently cited rationale would be the lack of proper training. Responsibility for deficiencies rests not with the individual supervisor, but with the amorphous "them" who failed to provide adequate preparation. But if management does its part — sponsors a training program designed to get at some of their problems — individuals can no longer hide behind that smokescreen. Whether anything was learned or not, responsibility for producing is shifted to the person who should own it to begin with.

And people *do* learn, albeit in oblique ways sometimes. The following story is my own personal experience, but anyone is free to take it and use it as one's own. All my life I felt socially handicapped because I couldn't dance. Or thought I couldn't. And because I had convinced myself I couldn't, I didn't. It happens my wife and I belong to an amateur theater group and not long ago I tried out for a musical. The director in his questionable wisdom cast me in the role of a featured dancer. It was one of those Gene Kelly things that involved leaping off barrels and going through some unbelievable gyrations. When the choreographer showed me the whole routine I told her she was out of her bucket, there was no way, etc. Well for six weeks in practice I made an idiot of myself (and darn near a cripple of my partner), but when the curtain went up, I did it! Today there is no music or other circumstance that will keep me off

the dance floor. Did I really learn to dance from that experience? Probably not. But the point is, I *saw* myself as a dancer, learned there really wasn't anything to fear (except fear), and from there the self-fulfilling prophecy took over. And I believe, if I believe anything, that the same kind of thing happens in traditional training programs, probably more frequently than we give ourselves credit for.

That's not the end of it. Given meaningful program content and competent instructors, other things happen. From all indications we have, we find people leaving our programs feeling better about themselves, better about their employees, better about their peers and bosses, and better about the company they work for. These may be intangibles — fuzzies, if you insist — but in my Magerless world of nonabsolutes, they are very real qualities.

When you come right down to it, there are only four ways I know of to change an organization:

1. Change the external environment (fewer government regulations, less union militancy, etc.)
2. Change organizational rules, regulations or structure.
3. Change the technological processes of the organization.
4. Change the attitudes, skills, perceptions, motivation, commitment, and desire for excellence of the people who populate the place.

There's not a whole lot most managers can do about the first three, but there's much that can be done about the fourth. And traditional training can help.

Proof? Dollarization? Bottom-line results? No . . . not now, probably not ever. But I'll bet a million bucks on what my instincts tell me. And you should oughta' wanna' too. — *Rod Beaulieu*

Rod Beaulieu manages Chrysler Institute's Management Education Department. He was recently selected as one of 10 executives from Chrysler to attend the two-year Advanced Management Program at Michigan State University leading to an MBA. He was chairman and Conference leader of the Industrial Special Interest Group program at ASTD's 1978 National Conference.

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