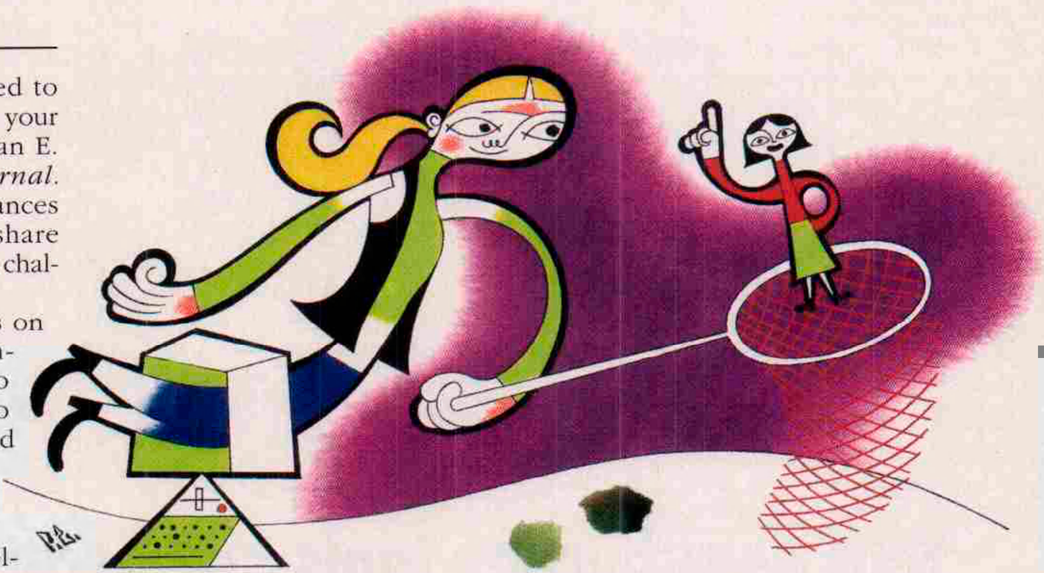
In Practice



Can't find someone to show you the ropes? Try casting your net for a mentor in cyberspace.

Internet 1

No longer are you limited to finding a mentor within your corporation, reports Joan E. Rigdon in the *Wall Street Journal*. Cast an electronic net, and chances are you'll find advisers who share your professional concerns and challenges.

Many people post messages on on-line bulletin boards or in-house electronic-mail systems to find experienced colleagues who are willing to offer career tips and support, Rigdon writes. For instance, a lone female computer scientist, frustrated at being ignored by her male colleagues, sought help on Systers, an electronic mailing list for female computer scientists. She quickly got advice from several counterparts on how to get her male co-workers to pay attention to her remarks.

The trick, says Rigdon: Find the right bulletin board and learn its etiquette. And if you can't find exactly the right place to post your message—create your own board.

Internet 2

You don't have to wait for the Sunday paper to peruse the latest job openings. Use the Online Career Center database, accessible via Internet, to search for a new position or fill an opening at your company.

The center, a nonprofit venture backed by 40 corporations, posts both job openings and resumes of job-seekers, reports the *Washington Post*. Users search the data base by keywords based on profession, state, or other criteria.

So far, most openings listed on the database are for highly technical positions, but organizations also have used the center to advertise for a pharmacist, a softball coach, and a store service-center manager.

If you can't gain access to Internet, the center will enter your resume for you for a $6 fee. Mail your typed resume to Online Resume Service, 1713 Hemlock Lane, Plainfield, IN 46168.

Check Your Gender Bias

By Ellen Boyer Ali, director of human resources, Anne Arundel Community College, 101 College Parkway, Arnold, MD 21012.

Contrary to popular belief, linguistic research has shown that men talk more than women do, at least in formal settings such as the workplace. Men also volunteer to answer questions more frequently, and they express themselves more assertively.

Illustration by Philip Anderson

Given these tendencies, trainers have to make sure that men and women have equal opportunities to participate in training sessions. Try the following strategies:

- Make sure your training room is physically comfortable and encourages interaction—for instance, by furnishing the room with moveable seating.
- Greet all participants warmly and enthusiastically; call everyone by his or her name.
- At the outset, tell participants that you expect everyone to participate but no one to dominate.
- Call on men and women in equal proportion, call on all participants by name, and praise contributions equally.
- After asking a question, wait for five to 10 seconds before calling on someone. Women often take longer to raise their hands than men.
- Avoid missing participants by making eye contact with everyone.
- Watch for nonverbal cues; for instance, a participant who leans forward might have something to say. Encourage participation by saying something like, "Can you start us off?"
- Research shows that both women and men listen more attentively to a man's conversation than a woman's. Listen actively to both men and women. Demonstrate attentiveness by nodding, affirming, and gesturing.
- Studies show that both male and female teachers tend to express more impatience and condescension to women than to men, not only in their choice of words but also in their tone of voice. Notice how you respond to men's and women's comments and questions and don't treat them differently.
- Use gender-neutral language both when writing and talking. Avoid false generics such as "man" and "mankind" to refer to all humans. Avoid role stereotypes—don't automatically refer to physicists and CEOs as "he" and nurses and secretaries as "she."

Most importantly—be flexible enough to incorporate techniques that are sensitive to the issues of gender differences and gender biases.

A Question of Productivity

What's the secret to developing workers who produce more? The Richmond, Virginia-area Metropolitan Economic Development Council answers that question with 10 of its own.

The council's 10 queries spotlight ways that human resource management affects worker productivity. The council ought to have some insights into this concern—according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, workers in Richmond, Virginia, add $88.74 in value per hour worked, compared with a national average of $47.97 per hour.

To managers who would like to increase their workers' productivity, council staff members pose the following questions:

- Do the people who work for you

understand what they are expected to do? Employees must clearly understand their jobs so that you and they jointly can gauge performance and progress.

- Have your workers received the training they need to do their jobs? Without adequate training, employees become frustrated and lose motivation.
- Do you offer employees access to refresher courses and continuing education? Enabling employees to learn new skills and brush up on old ones promotes innovation and self-esteem.
- Do your employees have opportunities for professional growth? Monotony fosters boredom.
- Are your employees allowed and encouraged to make decisions? The opportunity to use personal judgment promotes initiative and creativity and helps get work done more efficiently.
- Do your workers have chances to work in other areas? Crosstraining increases employees' flexibility, helps them understand the big picture, and gives them more pathways to advancement.
- Have you discussed career advancement with each of your employees? Workers must clearly understand what they need to do to earn promotions and pay hikes.
- Do your employees work under safe and comfortable conditions? Healthful, well-equipped working environments produce happier, more dedicated workers.
- Do you dispense praise as willingly as criticism? Positive reinforcement combined with honest criticism helps employees maximize their strengths and correct their weaknesses.
- Do your workers understand their pay and benefits? Employees are more likely to feel they are fairly compensated if you explain pay levels and formulas.

Of Butchers and Bakers...

Fat companies fail tests of corporate health, but newly lean companies often find themselves starved of productivity. What are modern managers to do?

Stop acting like butchers obsessed with cutting fat and start acting more like bakers seeking the finest ingredients available—well-trained, highly motivated workers, says Secretary of Labor Robert Reich.

Writing in the December 19, 1993, *New York Times Magazine,* Reich cites recent studies indicating that few companies achieve the gains in earnings and productivity that they expect after laying off workers.

According to Reich, that's because what companies save on payroll is outweighed by what they lose—the enthusiasm and loyalty of remaining employees and the cumulative knowledge and skills of those that were axed.

Another set of studies, notes Reich, suggests a different recipe for success based on three key ingredients: employee training, employee involvement, and employee profit- or gain-sharing.

A 1993 study by MIT researchers found that automobile manufacturers with all three elements in place produced vehicles faster and with fewer defects than counterparts that did not follow any of the three practices. And a study by Rutgers University found that businesses using one or more "employee-friendly" strategies were more profitable than businesses that didn't.

"Downsizing does not increase the value a worker contributes to the economy, because it does not enhance the worker's skills," Reich says. "It merely reallocates the work."

...and Pizza Makers

A pizza with a lot of pepperoni sitting on it—that's how Eastman Chemical President Ernest Deavenport, Jr., describes his company's organizational chart.

Eastman Chemical's "pizza chart" represents one example of what *Business Week* calls the "horizontal corporation"—one that eliminates traditional layers of management and erases traditional boundaries between departments.

Why are such corporations as Mobil, DuPont, Motorola, and AT&T tipping hierarchical organizational charts on their sides or reshaping them into new forms? Because, reports writer John Byrne, they have discovered that downsizing alone doesn't boost productivity—companies have to change how work gets done.

Traditionally organized companies spend a lot of time managing relations among departments and management layers, say proponents of the new-style charts. A horizontal structure—driven by cross-functional teams and supported by a skeletal group of senior executives—rechannels those efforts into serving customers.

Once they change their charts, companies also have to overhaul dramatically other internal structures. For example, as General Electric strives to become a "boundaryless company," it has adopted a 360-degree appraisal system in which each person's role in a process is evaluated by peers, subordinates, and supervisors. GE also ties compensation to skill development as well as work accomplishments.

Elements of "Pizza-Chart" Firms and Other Horizontal Corporations

So-called horizontal corporations actually can take many shapes, but they share certain characteristics, says writer John Byrne. To gain the advantages this structure offers, companies must

- Organize around process, not task.
- Flatten hierarchical layers.
- Use teams to manage everything.
- Use customer satisfaction as their yardstick for success, not traditional financial indicators.
- Adopt appraisal and pay systems that reward team results, not just individual performance, and encourage workers to develop multiple, rather than specialized skills.
- Maximize supplier and customer contact.
- Train all employees to analyze data and use it to make their own decisions; then give them the information they need to do their work.

Managing Teams

Work teams that don't succeed might thrive under new management. That's one suggestion from Wilson Learning Corporation, based on its study of 4,500 teams in more than 500 organizations.

Wilson Learning determined that organizations' infrastructures, policies, and procedures often pose significant barriers to work teams' success. So do group processes, such as a team's inability to deal with conflict and run effective meetings.

To overcome these hurdles, Wilson Learning suggests the following dos and don'ts for managers:

Do...

- encourage team members to confront their differences constructively
- keep the team focused on its goals
- stress the need to make decisions as a group
- tie the team's activities to the organization's vision
- help team members develop professionally
- provide fair and honest feedback on how well team members perform
- provide team members with opportunities to develop new skills and abilities
- give members freedom to determine details of how they do their jobs.

Don't...

- make all the decisions
- hoard information that the team can use to do its work
- try to do everything yourself
- take full responsibility for the team's performance and results
- challenge team members' ideas
- withold your input
- "own" all of the responsibility for the project.

Adjusting Overseas

An ability to speak the local lingo does not necessarily mean that expatriate managers will adjust well to foreign assignments, reports Personnel Decisions in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The firm studied factors that influenced the job satisfaction of 78 managers and their spouses posted around the world. All the managers worked for a multinational manufacturer of personal-care products.

Family happiness emerged as more important to managers' adjustment than language fluency. If spouses adjusted well and children were happy, managers tended to adjust well also. And, managers who adjusted well personally performed more effectively, the study found.

Managers who lacked fluency in their host nation's language adjusted as well to their new culture as managers who were fluent. Managers' spouses, on the other hand, were more satisfied if they spoke the local language fluently.

For more information, contact Gwen Stucker, Personnel Decisions, 2000 Plaza VII Tower, 45 South Seventh Street, Minneapolis, MN 55402-1608; 612/339-0927.

Companies Beef Up Expatriate Workforces

Many companies are sending more employees on expatriate assignments, and many are sending more women on such assignments, reports a survey from Windham International and the National Foreign Trade Council.

The International Relocation Trends Survey Report, released in December, found that 61 percent of companies surveyed reported that their expatriate population had increased over the past five years; 85 percent of respondents said they expect to have at least as many or more employees stationed overseas during the next five years as they do now.

The survey found that 10 percent of expatriates are women—higher than previous estimates of 5 percent.

The survey also found:

- Forty-six percent of expatriate spouses hold jobs before the overseas assignment; 10 percent hold jobs during the assignment.
- Seventy-eight percent of the expatriate population is married; 10 percent of married expatriates do not bring their families with them overseas.
- Expatriate assignments typically last three years.
- In 92 percent of the cases, line managers select employees for overseas assignments; human resource managers are involved in the selection 54 percent of the time.

For copies of the report, contact Windham International, 126 East 36th Street, New York, NY 10016; 212/545-7978.

Slipping Off a Career Ladder

The prospects for steadily climbing a career ladder steadily diminish as companies downsize. According to Cliff Hakim, author of *When You Lose Your Job,* ladders no longer are an appropriate symbol of professional growth and achievement.

Instead, he suggests that employers and employees think in terms of career "lattices"—crisscross frameworks that support moves in all directions.

This type of structure encourages employees to focus more on contributions and collaboration than titles and promotions, Hakim contends. He suggests the following strategies for companies that want to encourage workers to traverse career lattices:

- Offer 5 percent to 10 percent raises to people who move laterally.
- Clearly define internal and external customers' needs and the skills required to meet them.
- Arrange for managers and employees to meet regularly to discuss workforce mobility planning.
- Explain the company's incentives for lateral movement clearly and honestly.
- Offer a "smorgasbord" of training and development options.
- Make a commitment to consider internal candidates first for any job openings.
- Reward managers and executives who foster lateral movement.
- Give a career lattice time to work.

Coaching Executives

The trends toward downsizing and flattening organizations notwithstanding, many corporations spend big bucks to retain and groom the cream of their executive crop, reports Ann Sample in *Fortune* magazine. One currently popular strategy: executive coaching.

Both lone practitioners and large consulting firms offer coaching services for fees ranging from $1,500 a day to $100,000 or more for programs that last several years.

The employee-empowerment movement has given the field a boost, Sample writes—more companies now ask employees to evaluate higher-ups. If subordinates tag a valuable executive as a tyrant or a recluse who hobbles their performance, a business might hire a coach to help the executive change his or her ways.

Before contracting with a coach, check his or her credentials and methods carefully, Sample advises. Some coaches restrict their strategies to behavior modification. Others take a more psychoanalytical approach. Whatever approach is used, follow-up is critical to achieve lasting changes in behavior, reports Sample.

"As companies shrink, they demand more effort, inspiration, and versatility from everyone who remains," Sample notes. "An executive who obstructs that creativity, innocently or not, ought to get coached—or get out."

Meeting Tip

To help keep meetings focused, consider using two overhead projectors, one on each side of the podium, suggests the 3M Meeting Management Team in *How To Run Better Business Meetings.*

Use one projector to display your agenda and the other to display other visuals. This strategy makes it easier for your audience to follow your presentation.

Leaders and Laggards

Human resources ranked last in a survey of how companies rate their departments' service to internal customers.

According to *Internal Service Performance: What's Happening in American Companies and How To Improve It,* 60 percent of executives responding to the survey said that inferior internal service hobbles their ability to compete effectively.

More than 800 executives responded to the study, conducted jointly by Wm. Schiemann & Associates and *Quality* magazine. Only 24 percent gave human resources a favorable rating. The quality function earned the best marks—48 percent of respondents rated it favorably.

Most respondents said that the quality of internal service directly affects the service given to external customers, and respondents offered some clues as to how to build a competitive advantage by bolstering internal performance.

Among executives who praised their internal services, some common practices emerged: 61 percent reported having a clear service-improvement plan; 65 percent measure structures, roles, and jobs; 63 percent measure employee capabilities; and 72 percent measure operations, production, and delivery-system efficiency.

Respondents who rated their internal services unfavorably cited the following as barriers to change: lack of leadership (77 percent), inappropriate organizational culture (62 percent), lack of perceived need for improvement (61 percent), and ineffective organizational structures (55 percent).

The study's authors, Mary Cronin Azzolini and John H. Lingle of Wm. Schiemann & Associates, say the findings suggest six steps executives should take to improve internal customer service:

- Develop an up-front plan so that improvement actions are integrated with ongoing initiatives and business strategy.
- Assess customers, staff, and suppliers to pinpoint gaps in service performance.
- Align work processes, structure, systems, culture, and capabilities with business strategy and customer expectations.
- Secure commitment and clearly define roles and responsibilities.
- Provide continuous performance improvement through communication, education, rewards, and recognition.
- Establish ongoing measures for tracking and monitoring service performance.

"In Practice" *is edited and written by* **Erica Gordon Sorohan.** *Send items of interest to "In Practice,"* Training & Development, *1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043.*