"HOW TO KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT
AND LET LINE SUPERVISORS TRAIN THEIR OWN FOREMEN."

MAXIMIZING INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES

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In 1976, we began to think seriously about using line supervisors to train foremen who report directly to them. Since the training was intended to change supervisory behavior, the utilization of second-level supervisors as trainers appeared to offer several advantages. First, it would facilitate transfer of learning from the classroom to the job. Second, it would add credibility and relevance to the instruction. Third, it would provide the instructional manpower necessary to complete the training throughout a large trainee population within a relatively short period of time. But frankly, using second-level supervisors as trainers also scared us to death.

We discussed our rationale with a number of other training and development professionals. They all agreed on one point: second-level supervisors could not be expected to perform effectively as trainers in a learning design of the type we were proposing. This for the following reasons:

1. They lack the skills necessary to carry out a trainer role in an experiential, group-centered training design.

2. It was unrealistic to expect that required competence levels could be developed with the time and resources available.

3. Little evidence existed to suggest the presence of the motivational factors necessary to induce a large group of second-level supervisors to accept the burden of a demanding trainer assignment in addition to already heavy operational responsibility.

4. Second-level supervisors cannot be expected to effectively handle instructional responsibility where training content runs counter to deeply entrenched organization norms, as would be the case with this program.

Even though this assessment was supported by our experience with supervisory training, we felt strongly that involvement of the second-level supervisors in the trainer role could lead to a pay-off which justified the risk. With considerable trepidation, we plunged ahead. The remainder of this article describes the training design and our experience in using second-level supervisors as trainers for this program.

Our unionized manufacturing plant of more than 2,000 employees was feeling the impact of an industrywide business environment marked by sharply accelerating energy, materials and labor costs and relatively fixed product price levels. Immediate improvement in operating efficiencies was required. While significant progress toward this end continued to be made in terms of manufacturing process improvements and reduced energy consumption, similar gains in employee productivity were also necessary. A consistent, plantwide improvement in the supervisory effectiveness of our foremen was determined to be a necessary first step in accomplishing this objective.

Interview data and analysis of prior management training results indicated that any training undertaken to improve the supervisory skills of our foremen must meet the following criteria:

1. It must focus on the develop-

ment of effective supervisory behaviors.

2. While the design must be soundly grounded in behavioral theory, the instruction itself must be relatively theory-free.

3. It must provide for transference of the classroom learning to the job.

4. Classroom experiences must have high face validity.

5. It must be perceived by the participants as relevant to their jobs and as being fully supported by higher management.

6. It must accommodate the need to train 130 foremen, in groups of six to nine participants, over a period of six months.

In view of these requirements we felt that utilization of the second-level supervisors as trainers was indicated and proceeded to develop the following design on that basis.

Gathering Design Data

We conducted in-depth, individual interviews with a representative number of foremen. They were asked to describe incidents in which they personally had taken action to resolve a significant supervisory problem and to describe the results of the action taken. In analyzing this data, we found that the problems or situations chosen by the foremen as "significant" grouped into categories around such issues as absenteeism, job performance, follow-up action and discipline. We also found that those actions yielding positive results were consistent with sound employee counseling principles.

The training was structured into eight modules based on the problem types described by the foremen as significant. Behavioral objectives were delineated for each module and the content developed around key action steps. The necessary visuals, participant work books and other instruments were then prepared. Videotape vignettes were also developed to serve as positive models and three case role-plays were written as vehicles for application of the training content in each module.

The vignettes and case role-plays were developed from and adhered closely to the incidents described during the foreman interviews and reflected the operational and social environment in which the foremen work. Each of the eight modules followed essentially the same learning sequence: cognitive understanding of the key action steps; application of these steps by means of the case role-plays; application to on-the-job problems by analysis and role-play of actual situations faced by the individual participants. Training time of 32 hours was estimated for completion of the eight modules.

Program Development-Trainer Training

Objectives of the training required that each supervisor/trainer develop a thorough knowledge of the program content and proficiency in the mechanical and process skills necessary to effectively utilize the training design and to productively deal with the personal concerns of the foremen trainees. These objectives were converted into *Task Detailing Sheets* and preparation of highly detailed *Instructors' Manuals*. Program structure provided maximum opportunity for each supervisor to practice the mechanical and process skills and demonstrate the proficiency levels required.

We introduced the program to 40 supervisors (including those who would later be selected to act as trainers) and top managers by means of a 16-hour seminar. Participants worked in two organizationally heterogeneous groups. The seminar was designed to provide a common understanding of the training objectives and an overview of the program content.

Participants also experienced the utilization of positive feedback as a supervisory tool to provide on-the-job reinforcement of the behaviors established as the objectives of the foreman training.

All participants identified desirable behaviors, determined where these behaviors might occur, developed strategies for reinforcing these behaviors and tested these strategies by means of role-play and feedback from other participants. Four members of top management modeled appropriate behavior by taking substantial train-

er roles in various segments of the seminar. Participant concerns regarding management support for the training and program relevancy were openly discussed and productively handled by the total top-management team in attendance.

At this point 23 supervisors were selected as trainers of the foremen reporting to them. All second-level supervisors responsible for the supervision of foremen were chosen. While consideration was given to such criteria as communication and interpersonal skills, the ability to model the behavior propagated by the training and prior instructional experience, we did not elect to eliminate any of the selected supervisors for these reasons. This resulted in a highly diverse group of trainers in terms of these criteria, as well as age, work experience, level and type of education and personal commitment to the project.

Over a period of 36 classroom hours, the supervisor/trainers received instruction in the required training techniques and information regarding learning theory applicable to these techniques. Each supervisor developed content knowledge and the required mechanical and process skills by practicing with successively larger and more difficult segments of the program.

Process skills were further developed through the identification of the negative behaviors likely to be displayed by the foreman training groups and by injectng these into the practice segments. Each supervisor/trainer received continuing feedback and positive reinforcement from peers and from the program leaders. Videotape recordings, which permitted trainers to see and hear themselves interacting with a training group comprised of other participants, were also prepared and proved to be an effective tool. The degree to which program objectives were met was tested when each participant demonstrated his or her competence level through presentation of one complete training module.

Twenty-one of the 23 supervisors clearly demonstrated the competence levels necessary to carry out the training. Two required additional practice and coaching. We found we had completely underestimated the ease with which they would develop the content knowledge and mechanical skills. Process skills developed at a slower rate but accelerated rapidly as the participants became more aware of the utility of these skills and as the concept of a group-centered trainer style gained acceptance.

Both the platform and process skills were valued by the supervisors and were seen as transferable to other work-related environments, such as formal presentations and meetings with peers and superiors. The degree to which participants "bought in" to the training, its objectives and the supervisory concepts espoused increased steadily throughout the training. While we considered these results to be excellent, the acid test was yet to come.

Foreman Training

The foreman training was conducted in groups ranging in size from six to nine participants. Supervisors acted as trainer for those foremen reporting directly to them, insofar as operating requirements made this possible. The eight, four-hour training modules were scheduled over a period of six months.

In spite of the excellent results realized in the trainer training, the risks incurred by our decision to make extensive use of second-level supervisors in the trainer role appeared to loom larger as the time approached to begin the foreman training. We monitored the first module presented by each supervisor but resisted the urge to become involved in the training. Our only input was to provide verbal and written feedback to each trainer upon completion of the classroom session.

The effectiveness of the supervisor/trainers surpassed our expectations. Several of them consistently demonstrated trainer skills equal to our own. All of them related to the participants effectively and gave the training a relevancy and credibility that could not have been achieved with an "outside" trainer.

Follow-Up and Redesign

By the time each supervisor/trainer had completed the first two modules, the need for adjustment in the original design became evident. The 23 trainers met with us in two groups to identify and share problems already encountered or anticipated in the future, to prioritize these problems and to develop solutions.

The predominant difficulty was determined to be the repetitive nature of the training which was causing a loss of interest on the part of both trainers and foremen trainees. This stemmed from the design itself, which was highly structured for ease of handling by relatively inexperienced trainers, and because development of the supervisory skills on the part of the foremen required a somewhat repetitious round of practice and feedback. The supervisor/trainers developed over a dozen viable ways to handle these problems. These included such methods as different participant / instructor mixes, utilization of more sophisti-

cated role-play techniques, greater use of small groups, and involvement of the foremen themselves in the instruction.

Once again, we found we had underestimated the ability of the supervisors. They were entirely capable of making those innovations necessary to meet the needs of their trainees. We backed off at this point and gave them the latitude to deviate from the established format in any manner that was consistent with the objectives and content of the training and restricted our role to that of a program resource.

Expected Results

The end results of this training effort will not be known until December of 1978. At this time, data should be available which will indicate the degree to which on-the-job supervisory behavior at the foreman level of the organization has changed. Shifts in such indicators as absentee rates, overtime hours, grievance volume, accident rates, labor productivity, product quality and yield data will also be analyzed and compared with the behavioral data.

Since an empirically sound evaluation design utilizing appropriate experimental and control groups was not possible due to operating requirements, the degree to which shifts in the behavioral profile of the foreman population correlate with changes in labor productivity data can only imply a possible relationship between the two. While we find the ambiguity of this evaluation method somewhat dissatisfying, it does use as its primary measure perceived changes in on-the-job behavior. In short, it attempts to measure utilization of learned supervisory skills, rather than cognitive gain.

Several synergistic and normative effects are also expected. More productive relationships between management levels and between departments within the organization are now evident, in terms of greater openness in communications, commitment or organization objectives and reduced parochialism. Supervisory principles propagated by the training apply to all supervisor/subordinate relationships. These have been strongly reinforced and reduced to writing in the form of 25 key supervisory behaviors that are expected of all management levels. While the jury is still out on this issue, evidence is developing to suggest that these behaviors are becoming the supervisory norm at all levels of the organization.

The most noticeable immediate change has been the improved capability of the supervisor/trainers. This change is reflected not only in the application of their newly acquired trainer skills to other aspects of their jobs, but also in the improved day-to-day supervision of their subordinate foremen and in a broader view of their management role and influence within the organization.

Necessary Conditions

While the evaluation of the total training effort cannot be made at this time, we are convinced on one point — under certain circumstances second-level supervisors can effectively fulfill demanding trainer roles in management training programs! We found the existence of the following conditions to have a greater impact upon their effectiveness than such selection criteria as communications and interpersonal skills, evidence that the supervisor personally utilized the principles espoused by the training content or prior instructional experience.

1. The availability of adequate training staff resources to design appropriate program structure, training materials and to develop those trainer skills necessary to utilize the design.

2. Program objectives that are perceived by trainers as relevant to the needs of the business.

3. A total implementation strategy that evokes trainer commitment to the program.

4. Behavior on the part of higher management that supports the training and is consistent with the program content.

5. Payoff to the trainers in the form of valued developmental opportunities, positive feedback from higher management and tangible benefits from the organizations' reward system.

On a personal level, our work with these 23 second-level supervisors has proven to be a valuable experience. As training and development specialists, we had become so entangled in the esoteric underbrush of our profession that we underestimated the capability of "nonprofessionals" to perform effectively as management trainers.

We found that, given reasonable support from the organization of which they are a part, most middle managers can do an effective job without "benefit" of prior trainer experience, graduate study and seminars. As this became evident, we redefined our role as that of a training resource in support of *their* program and in so doing learned the value of keeping our mouths shut. A most useful, and on occasion, a painful lesson.

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