

"HOW ONE BECOMES A SPECIALIST IN A BUSINESS  
ONE KNOWS LITTLE ABOUT . . ."

# "IS THERE A CATALYST IN THE HOUSE?"

BY RAY CRAPO

"How can I become a training and development specialist in a business I know nothing about?" That question comes up time and again to those of us who make our professional contributions as mentors and workshop leaders for people in transition.

People exploring career change — or transition — into the training and development field come from a wide variety of occupations and professions. They not only have the usual concern about how their existing knowledge, skills and abilities can be applied to the training and development field itself but they also have a profound concern about how they can function as "specialists" in a business in which they have never been engaged. This concern is particularly manifest among those who come from the "non-profits." Many of them have had all of their adult work experience in fields such as social work and education, and cannot help but wonder how they would fit into anything from brokerage firms to zinc alloy distributorships.

At a recent transition workshop conducted in New York City by the local ASTD chapter, it was thought that the principal speaker had adequately addressed the question. As the day continued, however, it became evident to workshop leaders that most participants had not understood. In one discussion group the question resurfaced only a half-hour before the program's end, and many group leaders were observed in post-session conversations assuring participants that they were qualified to become training and development specialists in unfamiliar industries. It was obvious that they had yet to comprehend the true role of the training and development specialist.

The answer to the question of how one becomes a specialist in a business one knows little about may be found in one word: "catalyst." With apologies to those who have more than a scant knowledge of chemistry, a catalyst is a separate, unique substance that causes catalysis and then exits during the process, not becoming any part of the final products. Webster's de-

fines catalysis as: "an action or reaction between two or more persons or forces precipitated by a separate agent and especially by one that is essentially unaltered by the reaction."

Let's get away from the chemistry set and into the world of business. The trainer's unique skill lies in making programs happen. He or she does not need to know the business of the business (although that learning will come along quickly enough) but needs to know the business of creating, implementing and evaluating training programs. It is not necessary for a person to present even one small part of any program! While that may be appropriate in some instances, the trick is to get others involved in the creation, implementation and evaluation phases of each program.

Program creation is usually initiated as a result of someone's perceived need. The trainer is notified of this need and should respond to the initiator. Interviewing skills must now be employed to determine program objectives, target populations and an up-front

evaluation of whether a training program is the best way to proceed in the first instance. If it is, then the catalyst must work to find those people within the organization who have the knowledge, skill and/or abilities necessary to create, and perhaps deliver, all or part of the program. Should those resources not be available within the organization, then the catalyst must look outside, employing consultant and vendor services. This process reveals another important facet of the trainer's job.

#### "Sears Catalog" File

When people in transition explore the training and development field, their mentors should share their "Sears Catalog" file with them. This is usually a series of very thick files filled with brochures from vendors and consultants, containing almost every conceivable variety of available programs and additional areas in which customized programs can be created. It is important that the trainer shop wisely, and networking through professional organizations often pays generous dividends when it comes to finding a competent consultant. A person new to training and development should create a "Sears Catalog" file immediately, and leaf through it from time to time to recall what is available.

Whether it be through the marshalling of talent within the organization or through the use of outside resources, the trainer's job is to be sure that the program objectives are clear to all involved, and that a truly professional design is emerging. The statement of objectives and the creation of good design — as differentiated from program content — are the skills the catalyst contributes at this stage of the process. Many training and development specialists deliver all or part of a program or programs as a part of their job responsibilities. This still does not change his or her role in the design part of the program process, however.

The training and development specialist understands the program process better than anyone else. The importance of attention

spans, the need for a mixture of activities and presentation styles, the proper selection as to whom should deliver parts of the program, based upon their personal characteristics (as differentiated from job knowledge), the appropriateness of materials in terms of flow, readability and clarity, the selection of program sites — these are the trainer's contributions.

The best material poorly presented is a waste of valuable resources. Failure to vary the presentation formats, time breaks appropriately, and make comfortable physical arrangements also wastes resources. The training and development specialist prevents waste through good program design.

"Language stripping" is an important aspect of the catalyst's skills. He or she must become familiar with the target population to see if there is a "vocabulary match" among the potential presenters and the audience. It is very, very easy — and very, very human — to use highly specialized vocabulary, jargon and acronyms

so extensively that they are no longer recognized as unique by the users. This is where the trainer who does not have a background in the particular business has a distinct edge. The specialized terms are also strange to him or her, and thus there is a built-in advantage in that language used in the conveyance of information can be "stripped" — i.e., broken into terms and definitions in a systematic way so as to expedite the learning process.

One must ask those with experience in the business to explain terms to a neophyte's satisfaction. Such definitions must be captured and be employed in the program. This is an excellent basis for concise and clear communication, a desirable attribute in any program.

#### "Holding Hands"

As the program delivery time approaches, the catalyst should not only inspect the physical accommodations to be used and meet the persons in charge of the site,



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but should also be involved in the very important process of helping presenters make good, indeed professional, presentations.

Now, more than ever, the catalyst's advice is invaluable. Some of it may simply be "holding hands" — assuring presenters that they will do well in front of a group. With others, it may be an editing process, helping the person whittle down an overwhelming amount of subject matter in a succinct and powerful presentation. Still others may need basic instruction on the use of an overhead projector, or how to maximize the impact of flip charts, or perhaps when it might be appropriate to distribute printed matter.

It is during this time that the catalyst becomes familiar with the nature and extent of the subject matter involved. Now, another important training and development skill comes to the fore . . . the creation of an evaluation instrument. As the key points emerge in the preparations, they must first

be reconciled with the program objectives, and then, if found to be compatible, some way of measuring change in knowledges, skills and abilities among the target population as a result of exposure to the program must be determined.

Again, here is a skill that has nothing to do necessarily with the "business of the business," but rather, the business of training and development. Ample literature exists about the methodology of evaluations, and good professional networking will provide even neophytes with well critiqued evaluation instruments.

The catalyst provides the framework and methodology for evaluation and perhaps the exact working of inquiry or prescription for observing behaviors, while the initiator of the program delineates in precise terms just what it is he or she wishes to measure. This is a true skill match on the professional-to-professional level where the catalyst makes things happen.

Program delivery time requires skills that are not unique to any business or profession, but the training and development specialist must have them all: the ability to make brief, accurate and enthusiastic introductions; the ability to run and perform normal maintenance repairs on supporting devices (e.g., replacing projector bulbs); the skill required to terminate another's presentation tactfully to keep a program on time; and the ability to be a "guardian angel."

Guardian angels eliminate any problems that may frustrate or fluster a speaker or disrupt a program. They are sure that everything is where it belongs and that all devices have been checked, focused, and are ready to roll. One training and development professional put it succinctly: "A good T&D specialist is never caught without a grounding plug adaptor." The guardian angel makes sure that all the potential little distractions do not eventuate from nametags being ready to having coffee standing by on time.

The catalyst keeps the program moving socially, whether it be at meals, breaks, or even at the bar,

because the T&D specialist is the organization. He or she represents management's interest in the training and development — and consequently the personal growth — of each participant. Wise and gracious socialization in good taste are important skills. When the T&D specialist happens to make a presentation, the standards of Ron Schwartz, director of Training at Merrill Lynch, apply: "The minimum standard is excellence."

### Winding Down

Winding down a program is a lot more than saying good-bye to participants, thanking site hosts, and repacking materials. Thank you letters citing specific contributions, with a copy to the addressee's boss, are in order, of course. The catalyst's main work involves the evaluation instrument. Now that it is completed, what does one do with it? How does the program initiator benefit from it? How do the presenters benefit from it? Finally, one must consider its usefulness to the organization and, of course, the T&D specialist.

Frequently more time and effort can be spent on the creation and validation of an evaluation instrument before a program than is spent in using it after the program. The T&D specialist bears special responsibility for the dissemination of discreet and published program feedback. Where part of the instrument design might involve instructor evaluation, the T&D specialist should be the bearer of tidings good and bad — and the interpreter of the results.

The evaluation stage probably means more to the catalyst than to anyone else. At the winding down stage a program's feedback becomes part of the input for the creation of the next related program. Armed with more personal knowledge of the business and having won friends and influenced people, he or she starts the process for the next program with a lot more sophistication and a new circle of supportive friends and colleagues in the organization. One's catalytic role will be more refined for the next interaction.

It was mentioned that the cat-

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alyst remains unaltered after an interaction, and may indeed disappear. That certainly is true when the program achieves all of its objectives, for the trainer's presence should not be requisite for the continuing operation of any part of the organization except the training and development department.

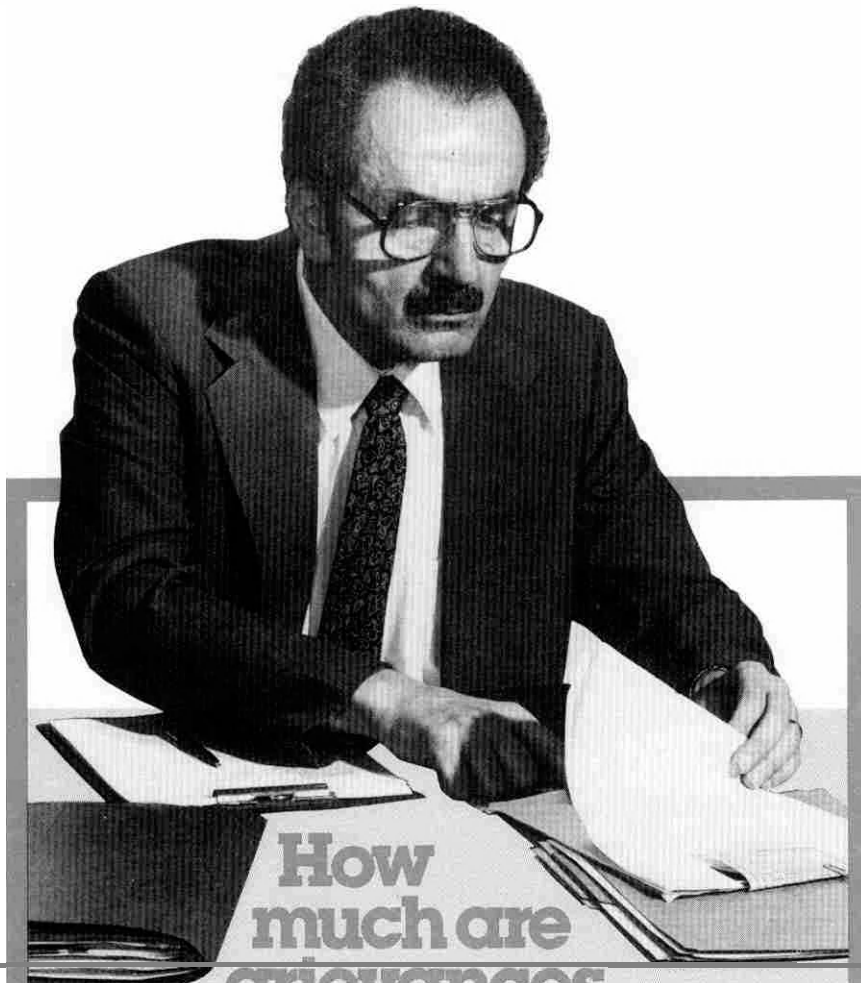
The object is to complete the mission and start a new process and program with another initiator.

Sometimes the catalyst does not quite disappear because the program failed to meet its objectives or because higher standards are set as one program builds upon another. Should this compounding of programs threaten to become perpetual in a particular area or department, however, the T&D specialist should be wary of becoming a permanent part of that department. The correct strategy in that instance is to make one of the programs the creation of a built-in training subsidiary in the affected unit itself, freeing the catalyst again for wider use throughout the organization.

The training and development specialist's role in the organization, then, is truly that of a specialist and catalyst . . . an agent of change eventually leaving no tangible trace of continuing involvement. The knowledge, skills and abilities the T&D specialist needs, as described in this article, do not involve the type of business the business is in. Every catalyst should have the same answer to one of Peter Drucker's favorite questions, viz., "What business are you in?"

No matter where you work, the answer should be: "The business of training and development." You are the catalyst in the house.

As an active member of the New York Metropolitan Chapter of ASTD, Ray Crapo mentors people in transition on an individual basis as well as in chapter-sponsored workshops on the subject. His articles on a wide variety of subjects have appeared in various training publications, and he uses his travel time on his job as the New York State Unified Court System's Education and Training coordinator to write his articles.



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