Literacy Training in the Workplace

Educator Jonathan Kozol estimates that "25 million American adults cannot read the poison warnings on a can of pesticide, a letter from their child's teacher, or the front page of a newspaper." And, says the author of *Illiterate America*, 35 million Americans "read below the level needed to function successfully in our society."

These are startling, even scarifying, statistics, and it's no wonder that concern for the problems has surfaced in the workplace.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the majority of illiterate adults are not foreign-born—English is their native language. Most of them are employed, and some may be working in your company, points out an article in *Personnel Advisory Bulletin*, published by the Bureau of Business Practice (Waterford, Connecticut).

Nonreading employees are usually identified during a crisis, or when a supervisor notices that they are having problems coping on the job. Other clues to a possible illiteracy problem are absenteeism, turnover, poor communication, and poor safety records.

For most nonreaders, illiteracy is a trap from which they cannot imagine escaping, and they go to extraordinary lengths to avoid detection. Many develop powerful compensation skills.

But the changing nature of the workplace in recent years has made it more difficult for these nonreaders to remain undetected. With the widespread use of computers there are increasingly fewer jobs for which reading is not a requirement. For example, until recently, it was possible for a skilled mechanic to perform most auto repairs without being able to read. Today, because of the electronics diagrams involved, a nonreading mechanic is almost helpless.

Many companies have found that employee education programs are cost-effective when compared to the expense of recruiting and training replacement workers for their nonreading employees. There are several options open to those companies that wish to provide reading training to their employees. They are:

■ *Contact a local educational institution.* This may be a good place to begin gathering information. A local school may have a package ready to offer you. If you choose this option, make certain that the package meets your company's specific needs and is cost-effective.

■ *Strike a cooperative arrangement with a college or university.* For a fee, some learning institutions will provide the personnel to teach a flexible program. In return, the company provides space and facilities that are shared with the institution. In such an arrangement it is usually possible for the client company to maintain control over the program.

■ *Recruit your own specialist or teacher.* This individual wil work with you to design a specific program and then will run it for you. With this approach you can tailor a program to your company's special needs.

■ *Utilize volunteer agencies.* Volunteer agencies can provide literacy training outside the company. One of these agencies, Literacy Volunteers of America (Syracuse, New York) is a good source of advice and help. Although such groups don't address specific job-related reading needs, the student learns general vocabulary and reading skills that will help him or her meet the company's goals. The employee/student can also request that his or her tutor provide help with a job's specific reading requirements.

■ *Do the job yourself.* Many companies have chosen this route, after first trying and abandoning one of the other approaches. For example, the Polaroid Corporation (Cambridge, Massachusetts) offers in-house education programs that serve everyone from employees who don't read at all to those with technical backgrounds who want to improve their reading skills. Polaroid finds employees with reading problems through the recommendation of supervisors and by referrals from employees who participate in the program.

Enrolling employees with reading difficulties in any training program is a difficult task and must be handled delicately. The supervisor or the company's basic skills director may approach an employee in need of training, explaining that the company is aware of his or her needs and would like to help. The structure of the training should be outlined carefully, including the assessment instruments, the time schedule, and the reasons behind the program. Making the structure visible to the employee shows literacy training to be like other company training programs—and, therefore, easier to accept.

Few students, once enrolled, are likely to drop out. Once they overcome the considerable emotional barriers to starting a program, students easily are motivated by the awareness that they are gaining a firmer hold on their present position, and quite possibly the opportunity for advancement. And success breeds success; employees who successfully complete literacy training are likely to seek additional training as well.

The ASTD Electronic Bulletin Board

Submitted by John R. Eldridge, director of instructional design, Global Technology Corporation, Silver Spring, Maryland.

For ASTD members, at least, the future has arrived in the form of a comprehensive communications system—the electronic bulletin board for train-

ing. Those interested can participate immediately in the bulletin board, set up under the sponsorship of ASTD's Computer-Based Learning Network by ASTD member Jim Kay.

Several options are available: you can send electronic mail to other members using the board, set up messages intended for all board users—a form of electronic tele-conferencing—and send files containing articles or other lengthy messages to your fellow correspondents.

To access the new bulletin board, take the following steps:

■ Get access to a microcomputer equipped with a modem and the appropriate software. It doesn't matter what brand of computer you have. It doesn't matter what the name of the software program may be, because all those on the market today meet international standards.

■ Using your telephone, which is operated through your compouter, call the bulletin board at the number listed below.

■ When the screen tells you that you are connected, simply hit the carriage return twice. That's all you have to do. The software checks the communications protocols and deals with "parity," "stop bits," and the other communications requirements for you. When the connection is completed, a menu of options will appear. Choose number 19, the ASTD CBL File.

If you need help using the board, you can call the following people: Jim Kay, the system operator, 703/827-4548 (work) or 301/294-3394 (home); Angus Reynolds, CBL Network, 301/468-8693 (work) or 703/471-1241 (home); John Eldridge, CBL Network, 301/946-5942. The number for the bulletin board in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area is 301/294-2439. Call between 12:01 a.m. (EST) through 8:00 p.m. working days only. If you get a busy signal, someboy else is using the board. (Sorry, only one person at a time can use it.)

Although the call is long distance for those members outside the Washington metropolitan area, members in 12 major metropolitan areas can call through PC Pursuit and save on costs.

If you do not have the hardware, purchase a modem through any computer supplier. If you do not have the software, the CBL Network will try to help you out. They recommend programs for purchase, or will sometimes supply

you with software at nominal charges for duplication and mailing. At present, they can help you with programs for the Apple Macintosh, the IBM PC, and Commodore 64 and 128.

For further information and a written users guide, write to John Eldridge, P.O. Box 2657, Silver Spring, MD 20902.

Idea Processing

Submitted by Leon Winer, professor of marketing, Pace University, White Plains, New York.

If you traffic in ideas (i.e. words and data)—but you're frustrated by the often time-consuming aspects of shuffling papers or index cards—then you may need an idea processor, a computer text editor that operates on lines of text instead of individual words. The outline underlies the structure of the idea processor. You enter one idea on each line. Then, you arrange your ideas in a hierarchy, with more comprehensive concepts higher, and subsidiary ideas lower. You move ideas around very easily, grouping and regrouping them until you are satisfied that your thinking has been represented fully and logically.

If the screen becomes too crowded, you "collapse" your main ideas (in effect, hiding the detailed substructure in the computer's memory). Then you "expand" when you want to work with them again. To highlight an idea, you "hoist" it to the top of the screen and conceal all the non-related material. And then you "de-hoist" it to put it back in its place.

You change and revise your ideas until you are satisfied. Then you can print them on paper, save your work on magnetic disk and return to it later, or project your ideas on a big screen and discuss them with your colleagues.

Idea processors run on the IBM PC and compatibles, Apple IIe, and the Macintosh 128K and 512K machines. The idea processor may be on its way to becoming the sixth "generic" program for personal computers (the others being word processor, spreadsheet, data base, graphics, and communications).

Historically, the first idea processor brought to market was the Apple II version of "ThinkTank," which came out in 1982. This was followed by the IBM PC version and the Macintosh versions of ThinkTank, 1983 to 1985. In the meantime, other idea processing products were introduced: "Framework," "Maxthink," and "Freestyle."

An idea processor serves as a modelling base for ideas, objectives, strategies, and tactics. You generate, develop, and evaluate your ideas and strategies on the computer screen—faster and easier than using paper and pencil or a word processing program. The result is that Planning can become more natural, even enjoyable, a necessary condition to throughness.

Few trainers now use idea processors, but its potential should be obvious. Applications include outlining articles (such as this one), preparing detailed outlines for others to follow, preparing

presentations, analyzing case studies, conducting case study discussions, outlining courses and seminars, and responding fully and concisely to client questions.

Three idea processors were used in preparing this paper: two commercially available products, ThinkTank 2.0 and Framework 1.1; and a new product scheduled for release in September 1985, Ready!

Framework, an integrated program, offers all six generic functions. Its publishers claim that, for many people, it may be the only program they will ever need. ThinkTank is a special-purpose idea processing program that includes a low-power word processor. Framework is powerful and, of necessity, more complex and costly. ThinkTank is narrower in scope, much easier to learn and use, cheaper, and, as an idea processor, more versatile.

The newest product, Ready!, is the fastest and lowest priced. It resembles ThinkTank in operation but lacks the word processing features. Its unique characteristic is the ability to reside in the computer's random access memory, while another program, such as a word processor, spreadsheet, or integrated program, is in the computer. You switch back and forth between Ready! and the other program simply by touching two keys. In addition, it is possible to transfer an outline created with Ready! to the other program through the keyboard.
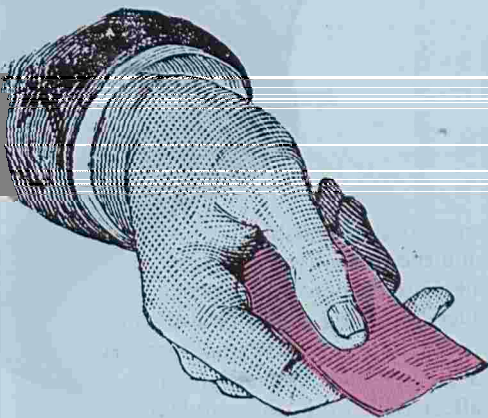
Hold That Pink Slip!

Getting ready to dismiss one of your employees? Think twice, says one management consultant: Employees bringing suit over unfair dismissal are gaining ground in courts.

Citing the largest single such judgement recently made by a Chicago court, a whopping award of $3.2 million in damages to a former employee who claimed he was illegally fired, Andrew Sherwood, president of Goodrich & Sherwood Company, a human resources consulting firm, suggests ways employers can limit liability and still maintain control of the business. All employers should take the following actions to alleviate, if not eliminate, potentially costly legal action:

■ *The company's attorney should review all wording in employment advertisements, company employee brochures, and job offer letter.* Never use words or phrases which imply that a contract with the employee exists. Words such as tenure,

permanent, steady, initial, and probationary should be avoided in reference to employment.

■ *All job application forms should include a disclaimer regarding oral promises and guarantees.* The forms should state that a new employee will undergo a trial period which will not limit the right of the employer to discharge.

■ *All employee duties and responsibilities should be spelled out in written job descriptions.*

■ *Candid, comprehensive, regularly scheduled employee performance reviews should be held detailing areas for improvement.* Copies of reviews should be given to the employee and kept on file.

■ *Potential causes for discharge must be clearly listed, coupled with a uniform, progressive disciplinary program that includes written warnings.* This list should be described as not all-inclusive, and a record of disciplinary actions and warnings should be kept.

If such practices are followed, says Sherwood, the employer will have supporting documentation when an employee dismissal becomes necessary—facts which show that the employee and the problem have been dealt with directly, candidly, and in a manner based on well-designed, job-related standards communicated to the employee from "day one." If in doubt, use your corporate legal resources to protect you before the problem occurs.

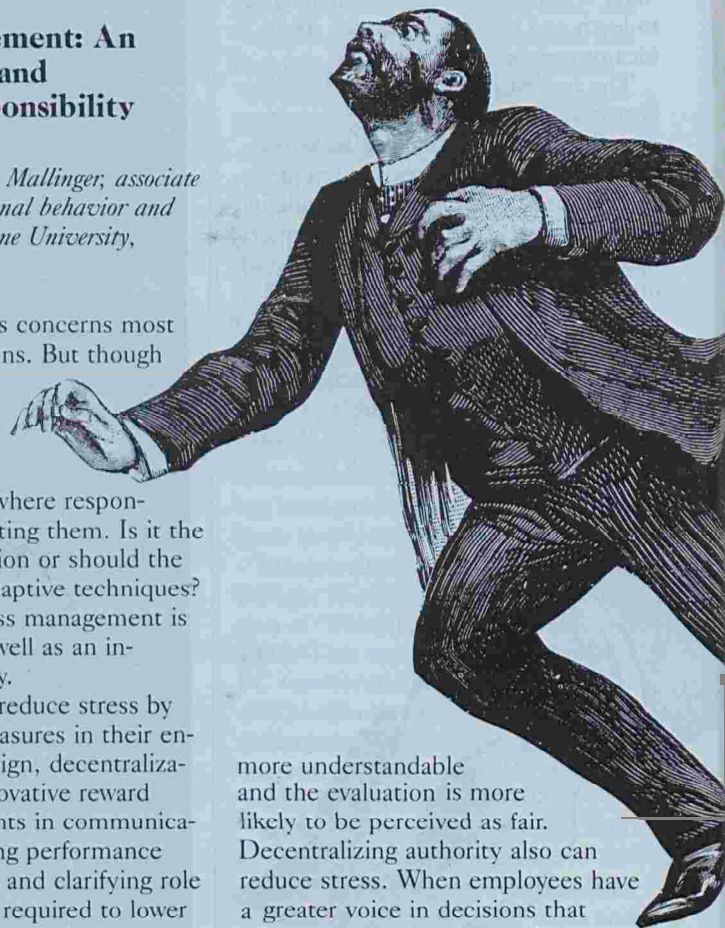# Stress Management: An Organizational and Individual Responsibility

Submitted by Mark A. Mallinger, associate professor of organizational behavior and management, Pepperdine University, Malibu, California.

Occupational stress concerns most American organizations. But though most of us recognize stressful conditions and their cost to organizational life, many disagree as to where responsibility lies for alleviating them. Is it the duty of the organization or should the individual develop adaptive techniques? Clearly effective stress management is an organizational as well as an individual responsibility.

Organizations can reduce stress by taking preventive measures in their environment. Job redesign, decentralization of authority, innovative reward systems, improvements in communication networks, refining performance evaluation standards, and clarifying role expectations may be required to lower employee uncertainty, ambiguity, and feelings of helplessness on the job. For example, job enrichment, which is concerned with making work more meaningful and fulfilling, can produce a sense of involvement and diminish feelings of powerlessness. Clarifying performance evaluation standards can reduce the ambiguity of the appraisal interview because the means by which the employee is to be evaluated are made more understandable and the evaluation is more likely to be perceived as fair. Decentralizing authority also can reduce stress. When employees have a greater voice in decisions that affect their work, they are less likely to feel a sense of helplessness in their job.
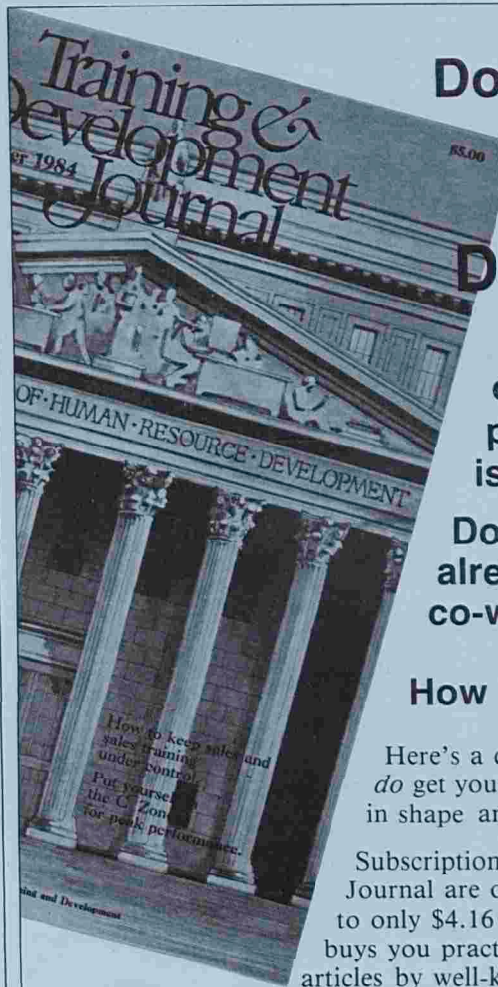
Nevertheless, organizations can't transform themselves into Eden-like settings. Improvements in individual coping strategies are also necessary because unceasing change is a reality in the business community. Economic, social, political, and technological forces require individual adaptability.

Time management, creative problem solving, proactive planning, career assessment, and assertion techniques can reduce occupational stress. These problem-solving approaches lessen physical and emotional reactions, and dysfunctional behaviors related to stress in the work place. The key is to ask ourselves what *opportunities* are present in each stress situation—turning stress from enemy to ally.

Frequently, our lack of assertiveness gets us in trouble. Taking on project after project because we cannot say "no" may result in having so much to do that we do nothing well. In addition, a belief that we are being taken advantage of can create feelings of resentment that, in turn, may get in the way of effective work relationships as those emotions are acted out on others. Learning to assert oneself gains respect *and* lowers reactions to stress.

Physical and relaxation exercise also helps. Although jogging, swimming, or meditation are not likley to solve the overload problems we face at the office, these activities act as an attention-diversion device which allows us to "get away" from the strain. Exercise, in addition to its effects on health, actually may help improve problem-solving by "freeing up" creative processes.

Although commercial programs and workshops are available to provide techniques in stress management, organizations, themselves, can offer stress management courses through corporate training programs. As costs stemming from job stress escalate at a rapidly increasing rate, the message becomes quite clear: In order to improve health, productivity, and satisfaction among organizational members, organizations and individuals both must develop more effective coping mechanisms.