

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

THE "MAGIC GADGET" AND THE "EVERY MAN A SHRINK" PHENOMENON

BY WILLIAM A. DETERLINE

Sometimes I wonder who's getting the training done! You know; the everyday, low-key tasks of helping people learn new skills and competencies required to get the work done that keeps our economy operating.

Browse through training manuals and publications in your library and you'll see what I mean. I get the impression that there are far more interesting things for people in the training world to do rather than help trainees learn job competencies. We all tend to lean toward those activities that are intrinsically the most interesting. Apparently conducting training — real, accountable, performance-oriented, job-performance requirements training — is mundane compared to at least two of the alternatives, which I'll call "*The Magic Gadget*" and "*Every Man a Shrink!*" Let me tell you about my perception of these two aberrations of our time.

"Magic Gadget" Phenomenon

We all like gadgets. There is a multimillion dollar market for gadgets of all sorts in this country. As kids we were all fascinated with toys, especially toys that "did something." Unfortunately, we tend to forget that the toys that did something were the ones that lost their fascination first, not just because they usually had a very brief life span, but because we found that the toys that kept their interest value the longest were



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those that *we* did something with or to or which required either some make-believe on our part, or some form of interaction with at least one other person. But in the beginning the child is fascinated with the toy that "does stuff."

A big seller this past Christmas season was a track around which a small truck meandered, automatically picking up and dropping off shells that turned the truck into a dump truck and then a dozer. By picking up and dropping off little items, all automatically, the child had nothing more to do than simply turn it on and watch.

A pinball machine is an example of a fascinating gadget of another sort . . . one that does involve some form of activity by the individual,

even if it is only "body English" and the operation of flippers. Did you ever watch a pinball addict, playing the machine by the hour? The bells ring, lights flash, the score mounts, and the player appears hypnotized.

Gadgetry has hooked a lot of people in training . . . people who are apparently looking for a magic device that will solve all their problems. We find ads for speech compressors, video equipment of all kinds, audio-visual devices of many varieties, and an added grabber — being in the training version of "show biz!" The expectation seems to be that the gadgets will do all the work without any help *and* will do all the training.

But don't be too quick to fault the training manager who seems to be gadget happy. There is a lot of potential to all that hardware if used properly. Of course, that's the rub: too often it isn't used properly, creatively, effectively, advantageously, or at all, once it has been acquired. Why not? Because the purchaser runs into the reality that the equipment is not a magic wand, but requires just as much analysis and design work on the "software" as any other approach, and sometimes more.

There's another reason to sympathize with the gadget-happy trainer. Some people in management are "bean counters" who like to count things and be able to see tangible things to count. A com-

pletely equipped TV studio, with an extensive library of tapes, is something to see and something to count, and something to show the board of directors. Even a totally unnecessary, unused and unneeded TV studio serves that purpose beautifully! A set of effective training manuals, training aids, job aids and other skillfully designed, well-validated, and highly effective training materials are not nearly as satisfying as the jazzy studio to many top managers and visitors.

There is a related "software" version of this same phenomenon. Trainers work with grids, quadrants, matrices and graphic representations of human performance, and teach others to do the same. Sometimes it's a relief to close the door on all the problems caused by people — conflict, downtime, absenteeism, backbiting, performance problems — and play with our charts and graphs. If that activity helps us open the door later and deal more effectively with the people problems, all well and good; but too often the software gadgets sit with the hardware gadgets, on an island of irrelevancy, in the middle of a sea of performance and training requirements!

"Every Man a Shrink"

The genie's bottle is one approach to the magic solution of all problems. Mysticism is another, mysticism in the form of amateur psychology, lightly applied — if at all — to the trainer's view of learning and motivation. How many desks have you seen in training departments upon which sat the little cardboard pyramid on which was printed Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs"? It is a totem that is apparently assumed to act as a mystical reminder to "take the hierarchy into account" in some way.

Apparently the prestige of people like Maslow, Skinner, Herzberg, Rogers, Gagne and others — makes their very names "totems" and psychology a good thing for the trainer. But is a superficial dip into a theoretical or analytical theory or methodology enough? That is

about what it amounts to in much of training's embrace of popularized psychology.

Recently, I saw a schedule for a train-the-trainer course in which four hours was set aside for an "in-depth study of what the trainer needs to know about modern psychologists and schools of psychology." Is the four hours too much or too little? For what practical consequence? "In-depth" — who's kidding whom?

This is the decade of "simply-add-water" psychology: no pain, no study, no application, no research, none of those things best left to the academician; but, it is an eager grab at anything new that smacks of psychology and deals with human behavior. Trainers have contributed considerable time, energy and money to transactional analysis, encounter groups, sensitivity training, assertiveness training, self-awareness training, personality classification training, aggressiveness training, put-down and survival training, and on and on.

Like the pinball machine, human behavior is fascinating — especially our own! But much of the human potential and human behavior emphasis of today has never been subjected to the hard look of any kind of research or evaluation, or even the determination of whether there are *any* consequences or *changes* in behavior or self-perception. Does that mean that a particular approach or "school" is hokum and nonsense? No, of course not, not necessarily. But neither does the mere existence of such a movement serve as evidence of its effectiveness, relevance or value. But *that isn't the issue!*

If movements of this sort make people "feel good," and those people invest their own time, money and effort in any activity that might help them in whatever they are seeking, that is their business, and we should wish them well. But is that what HRD in a training and development setting is all about? Should training and development be utilizing untested and unproven pseudopsychological or semipsy-

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chological approaches to self-improvement? Obviously I'm skeptical, but perhaps the answer is "yes!"

I am especially skeptical, however, when a training manager admits there is not enough time or money to do everything that absolutely needs to be done, and then throws up his or her hands and, in effect, gives up and says, "Let's do another one of those 'feel good' workshops that everybody likes so much." And that's how time and money — already in short supply — get used up!

For centuries, our curiosity about ourselves, our fate, our strategies, and the reasons why we are as we are have led us to look for answers wherever we thought any might lie. At various times in the past, attempts were made to account for behavior on the basis of the relative positions of the stars at the time of an individual's birth, bumps on the head, lines in the palm, the structure of

facial features, the shape of the body, the appearance of a person's handwriting, and the arrangement of tea leaves in the bottom of a cup.

These attempts rarely enriched the individual, but have certainly enriched our language and our stereotypic references: we attribute characteristics to people who have "beady eyes," and "flabby handshakes," and say that a person's handwriting reflects a "strong, open and direct" personality. A person is born under a "lucky star," or is "cold-blooded," or has the physique of a "shy, creative genius." Today, of course, we know better, and it is unlikely that a company training course would deal with graphology, phrenology, astrology, etc.

But are the newer, self-awareness endeavors any more valid or helpful, or any more appropriate a participant in the organizational human development arena? Nobody really knows — but as long as

something is "in" this year, we can be sure that some training and development departments, somewhere, will be riding the bandwagon!

This year some trainers are "into" the two halves of the brain, probably prematurely and superficially, riding that fad for all that it's worth, before we really *know* what it's worth or how relevant the consideration is, or what impact it should have on what we do. But it sure is fun to stand up at a meeting and tell management how we are applying some recent findings about the physiology of the brain in the things we do in the training and development department!

Nobody likes a killjoy. You will react negatively to the tone of everything I've said if you have, with the best of intentions, invested a lot of time, money and effort — and a lot of yourself — in the kinds of activities I've discussed. All I can say is this: you and I are in the same business and we're on the same side; we care about the people we try to serve by providing training and development opportunities for them. If I am forced to view certain activities with such a jaundiced eye as to see evidence of the "Magic Gadget" and "Every Man a Shrink" phenomena, don't you think that less sympathetic people than I might be even more skeptical?

If you are convinced that everything that you are doing is appropriate and justified, then these comments are not directed at you. Actually, when I sat down at my typewriter, I did not set out to attack anyone; I simply wanted to comment on a set of foibles that I think are very real. Perhaps I'm wrong; I hope so! — *William A. Deterline*

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