Back to Behavior Modeling

Training techniques have been debated in these pages since the *Journal*'s inception.
This article—a reasoned defense of behavior modeling in response to an earlier article's
criticism—continues the tradition.

By BERNARD L. ROSENBAUM

Last March, the *Journal* published "An Uneasy Look at Behavior Modeling," Scott B. Parry and Leah R. Reich's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of that training technique.[1] However, I believe that some misconceptions in their article may have misled the reader as to both the nature and efficacy of behavior modeling.

Parry and Reich suggest that behavior modeling:
- Markedly contrasts with social learning theory;
- Is not a rigorous technique;
- Uses models that are treated as universal;
- Bores the participants;
- Ignores the importance of learning from generalizations;
- Makes for weak transfer of training to the job;
- Uses media inappropriately;
- Creates non-job relevant roles for skills practice;
- Lacks theory.

Social learning theory vs. behaviorism

"Social learning theory contrasts markedly with the behaviorist approach of B.F. Skinner," state Parry and Reich. This common misconception requires clarification.

Behavior modeling practitioners and social learning theorists have long recognized the importance of environmental determinants of behavior. Robinson points out, "The social learning theorists distinguish between acquisition (learning) and reproduction (performance)."[2] Modeling is the vehicle for acquisition. Conditioning principles, with heavy emphasis on social reinforcers, tend to account for performance.

According to Bandura, "Reinforcement provides an effective means of regulating behaviors that have already been learned,

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but it is a relatively inefficient way of creating them.[3]

"...it is difficult to determine whether reinforcement creates the new behavior or activates what was already partly learned by observation.[4]

Social learning theorists incorporate the behaviorist approach. In fact, they emphasize the need for either external-, vicarious- or self-reinforcement to achieve the performance of an acquired behavior. Theorists and behavior modeling practitioners know that the failure of an observer to match the behavior of a model may result from insufficient incentives. It is with this in mind that behavior modeling programs reinforce the participants' acquired skills and encourage the use of managers as trainers. Management reinforcement is an integral component of a supervisory or selling skills program where transference of skills to the job is of prime importance.

Rigorous technique

Since there is some notion in the training community that behavior modeling "makes relatively light demands on the learners and the instructor"[5] it should be noted that a behavior modeling train-the-trainer session takes from three-to-five days and frequently entails follow-up refresher training. Certification processes are rigorous, and it is not unusual to find some rather exhausted trainers at the end of a training day.

The very nature of the behavior modeling process places a "do as I do" demand on the trainer, calling for exemplary trainer behaviors. Not only does the skill-building focus of behavior modeling make rigorous demands of the trainer and participants, but its training design has been one of the most researched and validated. Research continues and is of considerable concern to most practitioners. Indeed, Goldstein, in the 1980 *Annual Review of Psychology*, "hopes that the Latham and Saari[6] research will set a standard for things to come.[7] Robinson lists more than

50 references in his book on behavior modeling.[8]

Model as point of reference

Some may worry unnecessarily that modeled behavior is presented as the way to handle all related situations, but behavior modeling practitioners position the model only as a point of reference—a flight plan. As skills are acquired, trainees are encouraged to rely more on mediating principles that allow for flexibility than on the role application of key points. Nevertheless, it is through the observation of others that one develops an idea of how new behaviors are formed. Modeled activities serve as *guides* for appropriate performance and not as lock-step imperatives. Furthermore, it has long been recognized that the extent to which observers will identify with a model is a function of the degree to which it fits within the norms or culture of the organization. Therefore, models are often customized when pilot testing deems it appropriate.

Modeling as adult learning

The interest level of participants is critical to successful learning. Modeling designs have been highly responsive to the principles of androgogy.

After describing the successful results of AT&T's behavior modeling supervisory skills program, Moses discussed the implications and concluded that "Behavior modeling is adult learning."[9] Adult learning is achieved since the trainee immediately sees relevance between classroom material and on-the-job needs and because the participant is actively involved. In addition, modeling typically is preceded by a needs analysis that pinpoints skill deficiency areas. The modeled critical incidents meet the criteria of importance, frequency of occurrence and skill deficiency. Through research and review of the literature, Moses concluded that behavior modeling is a meaningful alternative to many forms

of empirical unsupported training efforts.

The issue of adult learning and behavior modeling is directly addressed by Rosenbaum and Baker in their article, "Do as I Do: The Trainer as a Behavior Model."[10] They describe specific behaviors that support adult-learning principles: maintain and enhance participant's self-esteem, focus on participant's behavior and its consequences, use active listening skills, use reinforcement to shape behavior and set challenging, but achievable goals.

Generalization of learning

Perry and Reich express concern about the acquisition of generalizable skills in behavior modeling designs and have recommended negative examples as a means of increasing generalization. Little, if anything is learned by the novice skier while observing another novice. Observing what not to do may be entertaining, but that's a rather weak justification for the expenditure of training dollars. We do indeed learn by acquiring generalizations; this is not news to behavior modeling practitioners. Social behavior would be inefficient if a new set of responses had to be acquired in every social situation.[11] Goldstein and Sorcher, pioneer researchers and developers of behavior modeling in industry, address the need for general principles to underlie modeling displays in their classic *Changing Supervisor Behavior*.[12] They call for the use of general principles both prior to the modeling display and as an integral component of skill practice.

Rosenbaum presents general principles of supervision and stresses the need for organizing concepts and rationales to underlie learning. In the preface of his book he points out that general principles must represent the rationale on which modeled behavior and strategies are built. Action steps followed by models are there to help the learner master mediating principles.[13] A truly exhilarating experience for behavior modeling trainers is to observe participants applying generalized behavior to new situations for which no model is presented.

Transference

Another concern is the extent to which participants in behavior modeling programs transfer skills back to the job. Parry and Reich believe that behavior modeling programs lack the tailoring necessary for relevance. But for over a decade customizing models has been a traditional approach in modeling and has supplemented generic programs in, for example, sales, supervision, negotiating, customer service and interviewing. Models have been developed for airline telephone sales agents, passenger service agents, stockbrokers, insurance agents, buyers and a host of other occupational groups. As a result of such tailoring, powerful identification with models has been achieved.

Since the earliest industrial applications of behavior modeling, it has also been recognized that the transfer of training is enhanced by training the managers of participants. Management reinforcement training is typically an integral component of a behavior modeling program.

Design considerations

From time to time, trainers are tempted to depart from the skill development focus of modeling. Reading, rereading and dissecting scripts has been recommended as has increasing group discussion time.

But interpersonal skills are developed experientially and that means practice. Participants regularly indicate that skill practice should be extended in modeling programs since it is there that knowledge is converted to skill.

It has also been suggested that non-job relevant roles be created for skill practices. Nonetheless, the simulation of actual work-related problems and situations are vital to skill development. Homogeneous groups are also encouraged so that participants in employee roles are able to react naturally and comfortably. When homogeneous groups are impractical, carefully prepared background information is provided for the participants in the responding role.

Finally, there are those who would have us enhance modeling by returning to techniques and procedures that stress the theoretical and philosophical. For several decades behavioral scientists, trainers and personnel professionals have been immersing supervisors in programs designed to alter their approaches to their employees. Sales training programs were designed to stimulate salespeople to work harder, but not necessarily smarter. Most supervisors have been exposed to concepts about the basic nature of human beings and their needs, the correlates and determinants of job satisfaction, and the characteristics of effective leaders. They have heard about up-to-date theories on the values of participative management, supportive relationships and a humanistic treatment of employees. They have had their consciousnesses raised, and it is as rare to find a supervisor who is unaware of the importance of the "people components" of management as it is to find a salesperson who has no awareness of the importance of need-satisfaction in selling.

The trouble is—and always has been—that most people don't know how to put their awareness to work. Research has produced disappointing results as to the extent to which improved attitudes and intellectual insights effect on-the-job behaviors. Participants understand the value of being able to motivate subordinates, negotiate better deals, sell more products and have more positive relationships with the public. What they need is not a return to more consciousness raising, but help with skills that get the job done. Behavior modeling does just that, and with refinements derived from research, it will do an even better job in the future.

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