

Co-Training: a Synergistic Outcome

By GERALD V. MILLER
and PATRICIA G. WILSON

Co-training is a specific strategy designed to enhance learning potential in the training setting. It involves dividing responsibility for an effective training session between two (or more) *equally responsible* persons. A wide variation of roles or specific tasks is possible, but the central issue in co-training is that both (or all) persons are concerned about the whole effectiveness of the learning—not just “their part.”

This article is an overview of the nature of training work, the major advantages of co-training, the relationship between co-trainers and the steps in the development of an effective co-training relationship, that is, the need to discuss and plan the relationship between co-trainers prior to the session as well as methods to nurture the relationship during and after the session. It particularly focuses on situations where a wide difference in experience exists between co-trainers, especially where one person is primarily a “content”

expert, and the other is a “training” expert.

This particular situation is difficult and requires the clearest delineation of steps. However, the elements of the co-training role and the stages for development remain constant, regardless of the range of differences between co-trainers.

In any training event for adults, there are two primary considerations. One is the *task*, or the content of the learning; the other is *process*, or how the learning is structured and managed. The role of the trainer

and/or media to focus and enhance the learning.

When these primary considerations (of what is being trained, and how it is being managed) are not balanced, training sessions are ineffective. If the content is the only consideration, i.e., “I’ve got to get this covered, whatever the cost,” presentations tend toward lecture, which is one-way communication, and has low involvement by the participants. This imbalance is characterized by much talking by the presenter and little learning and retention by participants. If the imbalance

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is central to the effective balance of these two considerations. Specifically, in addition to the knowledge, skill and expertise in the content of the training, trainers are also concerned about the range of training technology, including such aspects as how adults learn, group development, choosing appropriate experiential techniques and supporting the learning with questions, activities

is in the other direction, toward the process, sessions are characterized by a predominance of activities which, when completed, have little or no meaning to the participants.

Advantages of co-training

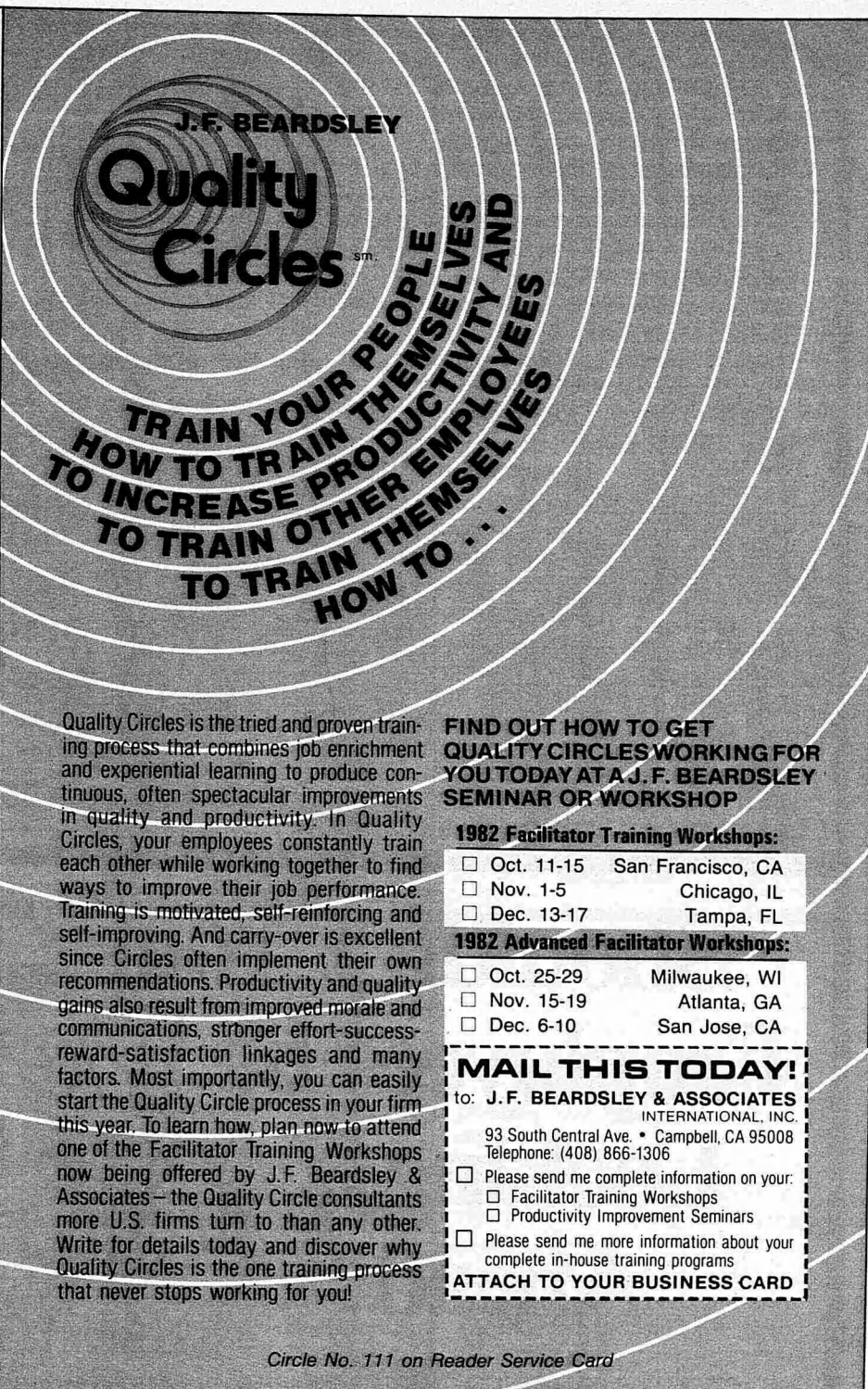
The job of balancing task and process is complex. It can, however, be greatly facilitated by

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using two trainers. The advantages of co-training relate to supporting the desired learning. The higher the degree of attention to task/content and process alike, the more likelihood that learning will occur! Therefore, the primary purpose and advantage of co-training is that content and process will be attended. This is especially true with large groups and/or the complex nature of the work. In addition, one way participants learn in groups is by studying trainers as behavioral models. This is true with regard to content areas such as team building, coaching and counseling, conflict resolutions and interpersonal communications where the old adage, "actions speak louder than words," rings true. Co-training provides not only two models of individual styles, but also offers the opportunity to develop different perspectives on the same content areas. Therefore, another important reason for working with a colleague as a co-trainer is to complement each other's presentation styles and content expertise, thereby heightening the learning experience.

Because of the reinforcement of two trainers, the opportunity to approach the topic in a variety of stylistic ways and the increased attention that can be paid to task and process, the likelihood that the learning will transfer to participants back on the job increases with co-training. Once, however, the decision is made to increase the potential effectiveness through co-training, the roles and relationship between the co-trainers need to be planned prior to any training event, because co-training calls for its own modeling of task and process and, therefore, its own facilitation.

Given the already difficult task of promoting learning, a co-training approach appears to make the training event even more complex. Some potential disadvantages exist, such as different orientations, timing and intervention strategies, threatening and competitive behaviors between trainers, overkill of con-



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tent, etc. In spite of these potential obstacles, co-training, when designed and managed appropriately, is a far superior strategy for increasing the positive impact of training.

Roles and relationships

The relationship between co-trainers must *demonstrate*

mutual responsibility, yet respect for individual differences. It is a difficult relationship to build, particularly when vast differences, such as style, presentation skills or knowledges, exist between co-trainers. But it is critical to effective co-training. If roles are divided in such a manner so that one person is "working" and the other is not even in the room,

essentially the behavioral message is inconsistent with co-training. Another example demonstrating the need for a solid, mutual relationship involves conflict based on differing points of view. Co-trainers must behave in a manner that shows that, although differences may exist, they genuinely appreciate each other's point of view. If the co-trainers do not behave in this manner, participants think they must choose between trainers or worse yet, negate any credibility for both trainers.

It is critical to demonstrate mutual responsibility. This does not mean that co-trainers have exactly the same role or tasks to perform during the session. One trainer may assume the "training specialist" role, with a group-dynamics, adult-learning focus, while the other may assume the "content specialist" role, with

subject-matter focus. Furthermore, the training process and content roles may alternate depending on individual strengths and weaknesses of the trainers. Together, the trainers can better monitor and facilitate individual and group development as well as the presentation of the subject matter learning.

Developing the relationship

Co-training requires its own facilitation relative to developing the relationship. This facilitation calls for concrete activities before, during and after the training event.

To facilitate learning and to provide proper support for trainees, trainers should do "team building" before actual training begins. Team building combines planning, rehearsing, developing interpersonal relation-

ships and specifying certain details on the activity itself.

In addition to assigning tasks, practicing exercises and rehearsing lectures, the trainers should spend time thinking and talking about their experiences as trainers. This is a central issue. Trainers should discuss and agree on how they can support each other, because training specialists or content specialists bring to the training personal experiences, beliefs, reactions and feelings about themselves and their roles. Before the training begins, they should examine their own and each other's attitudes about the issues and content to be discussed in the training. They need to share their expectations and personal limitations, compare reactions to the materials and discuss how they will handle delicate issues if, and when, they arise. Each should ex-

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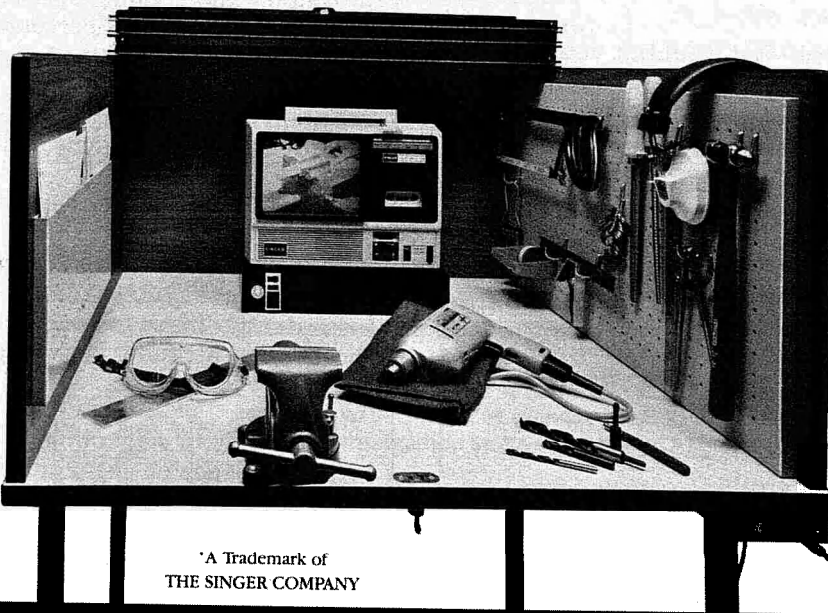
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plore with the other specialists the areas in which they feel confident and those in which they feel vulnerable.

The following paragraphs detail our model for developing and maintaining an effective co-training relationship. The model addresses content and relationship tasks. In situations where ongoing relationships need to be developed, these items become even more vital. Within the stages of this model, some concepts overlap because of the cyclical nature of ongoing relationships.

I. Initial meeting with co-trainer

The purpose of the initial meeting is to establish a personal connection with each other, discuss roles (such as training

specialist and content specialist) and share reactions to the pre-work activities, each other's data, surprises, etc. The content and relationship tasks that surface at this stage are outlined as follows:

Content Tasks

- Discuss and agree on purpose, goals and behavioral objectives of the session.
- Review modules, content areas, resource materials, etc.
- Reach a consensus about the expectations and experiences of the participants. Discuss your reactions to the makeup of the group, its size and any other special considerations.
- Develop strategies for the design/redesign of the session relative to methods, that is, linking appropriate techniques such as role play, lecture, demonstration, etc., with content areas.

- Discuss and agree upon the priority and sequencing of activities.

- Establish task assignments and operating norms based on comfort, experience, knowledge and skill levels:

- Decide who does what, that is, your role as the training specialist facilitating presentation, role play, group discussion, etc., and his or her role as the content specialist.

- Decide where you will sit in the group meetings.

- Agree on how much "there and then" discussion will be allowed and how you define "here and now."

- Determine an approach to the problem of "back home" application.

- Rehearse session and examine areas for improvement.
- Prepare alternative

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strategies and activities to handle any predictable problems.

- Establish an agreement and plan to support each other if problems arise with the group or in communicating the content.

Relationship Tasks

- Interview each other to ascertain knowledge and skill levels as well as likes and dislikes pertaining to the work you will be doing together.
- Clarify personal relationship by discussing roles, that is, "Who am I with you?"
- Identify and discuss the fears and assumptions about the group, content, process, etc.
- Encourage and support each other to increase or develop skills.
- State some of your co-training behavior patterns and indicate behaviors that your co-

trainer might see as unique to you. Share what you will attempt to improve in your style during this session.

- Discuss issues that have arisen in your past work with other co-trainers.
- Establish relationship support assignments:
 - Decide where you will be at various points so that support can readily be achieved.
 - Decide your norms for attendance for yourselves and for group members.
 - Discuss whether and how you will contribute when the other co-trainer leads.
 - Plan signals for "I need help," "you need help."
- Discuss/explain items about your past experiences as a participant and as a co-trainer.
- Discuss and agree on how to manage the co-training relationship:

—Where, when and how do we deal with issues between us?

—How will we handle conflict between us regarding disagreements on content, theories, procedures, etc., while in the session?

—Will we encourage or discourage conflict?

—How much of our behavior will be determined by our roles of content and training specialist, and how much will be personal and individual?

—How do we establish and maintain an atmosphere so that each of us can try on new skills, etc.?

—What is non-negotiable with each of us as co-trainers?

- Share the enrichment areas you are working on that may arise during this session and indicate what attitude, knowledge and skills you will personally focus on.

- Agree with each other relative to specific cooperation and support functions.

II. Second meeting with co-trainer

The second meeting serves as a "check-in" with each other to compare preparedness and provide support.

The content and relationship tasks during this stage are:

Content Tasks

- Reconsider and discuss any items that need further clarification.
- Review the plan for what each of you will do during the first session. What is the opening routine, etc.?
- Rehearse opening session or any new or difficult sections of the program.

Relationship Tasks

- Discuss how you are doing together, i.e., are there any relationship issues that need discussion and resolution before you move on?
- Compare your primary leadership tasks with those of your co-trainer. If there is a difference, discuss the implications for working in this group.

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- Reaffirm cooperation and support functions.

III. During training

The joint responsibilities during training are assisting one another to get the content across in the most effective manner, keeping participants involved and focused on their learning and maintaining the collaborative effort and the "oneness" effect of co-training. Generally, breaks and small-group activities during sessions provide the opportunity for trainers to check in with each other to discuss group development, content progress, co-training styles, etc.

The content and relationship tasks that surface at this stage are outlined as follows:

Content Tasks

- Examine indicators that learning is occurring, such as,

stimulating discussions, critical questions, ability to practice, etc.

- Examine indicators that the group has developed and that group cohesion is contributing to learning. Indicators could be the ability to be patient with one another, permitting others to completely express ideas and active participation in group activities.

- Review the sequence of activities, time frames and pacing factors.

- Maintain a comfortable environment by clearing materials or media and checking physical climate.

- Make transitions between trainers smooth and flow with the content and group needs.

- What is each of us going to do in the upcoming activities?

Relationship Tasks

- Review the specific coopera-

tion and support functions agreed to in the initial meeting.

- Examine indicators of collaborative effort and "oneness" approach of co-training, that is, non-threatening, non-compulsive behaviors, smooth flow of comments and interjections, etc.

- Present and maintain the trainers' relationship as a model for the group. (Demonstrate support for each other. Switch roles when discussing different aspects and issues of the training group. When it seems appropriate, articulate your differing points of view.)

- Take a supportive role whenever the other trainer is leading an activity by attending to group dynamics and intervening when it seems appropriate. (Avoid interrupting the other trainer except to clarify some point that seems confusing to the group.)

- Debriefing during breaks

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regarding co-training relationship:

—Soliciting feedback

a. What did I do that worked?

b. What did I do that didn't work?

c. How am I working as a co-trainer?

d. To what degree do we not share all the information we have?

—Renegotiate

a. As we re-examine our agreement, is there anything that we need to renegotiate?

b. How do we feel about each other?

- Debrief during breaks regarding how things are going in the session, soliciting mutual feedback and renegotiating, if necessary.

- Clarify each other's points, or help out with any communication breakdown by adding information where appropriate.

IV. After training

The purpose of meeting after the training event itself is to constructively assess the training and the co-training relationship and to lay the groundwork for working together again, if it should occur.

The content and relationship tasks that surface during this final stage are outlined as follows:

Content Tasks

- Discuss the extent to which the purpose, goals and behavioral objectives of the training event were realized.

- Share and discuss participant views and evaluations.

- Discuss what worked and didn't work and what changes would be made if the session were to be conducted again.

- Solicit ideas about improving your training competence.

Relationship Tasks

- Constructively assess roles as training specialist and content specialist.

- Discuss the feelings, fears and assumptions each had before

The outcome of the deliberation of the two exceeds the sum of their contributions as individual trainers.

the event. How do you feel about those items now?

- Discuss how well you worked together and how you could have better helped each other.

- Review co-training relationship, i.e., if we were to do it again, what changes in our co-training relationship should we make?

- Discuss under what conditions you would work together again.

- Discuss your personal and professional learnings from this event.

- Solicit ideas for your continued personal development.

The synergistic outcome

When two trainers work together collaboratively, a synergistic effect develops. That is, the outcome of the deliberation of the two exceeds the sum of their contributions as individual trainers. The co-training model, as we have described, provides a strategic process which, when followed, generates the synergistic outcome. As a result, the likelihood that the desired learning will occur is heightened.