

"WE NEED TO ESTABLISH AGREED-UPON STANDARDS AND CLEAR-CUT CRITERIA FOR JUDGING THE PROGRAMS WE INSTALL AND THE METHODS WE USE."

ON CRITICISM: TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

BY MALCOLM E.
SHAW

Recently on these pages Joe Batten reported that most assertiveness training, except his own "tough-minded" variety, supports "Me-Generation" selfishness and discourages vulnerability. Mr. Batten's arguments are directed at "stereotyped" assertiveness methods but his concerns echo a deeper and broader-based attack on all process training. Whereas Mr. Batten is criticizing bad training, others are indicting the entire field of human resources development. These indictments require a response.

Ten years ago our field was not discussed in the pages of "high culture" periodicals nor was it seen as of sufficient social significance to be dissected (with derision) by a serious historian; not so today. Peter Marin and Benjamin De Mott, noted analysts of contemporary culture, have, in the pages of *Harper's Magazine*, castigated process learning. Christopher Lasch in a book¹ described by critics as "cultural history at its best" and

"stunning" makes it clear that he considers Douglas McGregor's ideas and, in fact, most human resources development activities as ill-conceived and socially subversive.

What's happening? Why do social critics like De Mott,² Marin,³ Sennet,⁴ Schur⁵ and many others find the proliferation of programs designed to foster group development, self-awareness or interpersonal intimacy a dangerous trend? Why does Lasch believe that assertiveness training and kindred methods, in his words: "intensify the disease they pretend to cure"?⁶ Why does he believe that McGregor's views and what he calls the "common coin" of the social sciences leads toward "a society dominated by corporate elites . . ."?⁷ And why do training and management consultants like Joseph Batten and Eugene Jennings view most assertiveness training with alarm?

The Problem

The social critics who view contemporary behavioral science methods with contempt make essen-

tially the same changes as those who focus their uneasiness on assertiveness training or other specific action learning techniques. Although their targets may represent diverse aspects of human resources development the critics' concerns are at once strangely similar and curiously contradictory. Here is a summary of their major criticisms and a response to each:

CRITICISM: Process training, assertiveness training and other human resources development methods encourage self-centeredness and self-indulgence.

The critics believe that process training supports the values and behavior which caused Tom Wolfe to characterize our times as the "Me-Generation." The charge is that trainers, facilitators, and the new breed of social scientist are teaching people to wallow in their narcissism. "How do I feel?" and "What do I want?" are, in the view of the critics, the preoccupying concerns of the human potential movement. The critics claim that these concerns have infiltrated social and industrial institutions.

Assertiveness training, as they see it, supports self-aggrandizement and, quoting Christopher Lasch: "... centers on the struggle for interpersonal advantage, the deadly game of intimidating friends and seducing people."⁸ And from Joseph Batten: "Regrettably, too many (or so we hear) are taught to be defensive and self-serving."⁹

RESPONSE: Every major theory of human development takes the stand that the individual must be self-possessed and intact if he/she is to respond to others effectively. From Freud to Rogers and from Roethlisberger to Maslow the conviction that self-awareness is the key to personal maturity and interpersonal competency has informed both clinicians and industrial practitioners. "Feeling good about yourself" is at the core of Gestalt theory. Self-esteem is central to the strategies of even the most doctrinaire behaviorist.

General Systems Theory supports the premise that appropriate self-concern is essential to effective functioning. It postulates that

every living system (person, group, organization) must have well-defined boundaries if it is to sustain viability. It is only when those boundaries are appropriately maintained that healthy interactions can occur between the system and its environment. An individual without a clear self-concept, without a sense of personal worth is too disorganized, too fractionated, too frightened to relate to others with vitality and resiliency. He/she out of this confusion, acts with either self-denying non-assertiveness or covers up with inappropriate hubris.

Process training in general and assertiveness training in particular are concerned with facilitating the individual's capacity to interact productively with others. This essential function requires the integration of introspection and action. It is not possible to act effectively without awareness of the environment, of other people, other feelings. No serious practitioner has suggested that one can be effectively assertive without

sensitivity and responsiveness.

The capacity to identify and feel good about one's own resources is neither narcissistic nor self-indulgent. The capacity to act incisively based on what one knows and feels is not exploitive. The fear that process training encourages people to cross a mystical line from rugged individualism to self-serving, self-indulgence cannot be supported by experience or research.

CRITICISM: *Assertiveness training teaches people to be invulnerable and combative. Process learning teaches people to be self-absorbed and preoccupied with intimacy.*

This concern expresses one of the curious contradictions which, on the surface, makes the critics' assessment hard to follow. First they say: "You are teaching people to be inappropriately open — too intimate, self-conscious about feelings, 'high' on self-awareness." Next they say: "You are teaching people to be tough, self-serving and presumptuous about their personal rights."

RESPONSE: These contradictions dramatize the fact that these commentators are missing the critical component in the development of a more humane society (which is the social critics' ultimate goal) and the quintessential ingredient in personal effectiveness. In order to become vulnerable and to develop open relationships the individual must be capable of defending that vulnerability.

This theoretical premise can be expressed pragmatically: If one shows vulnerable doubt, or fear, or anger, or pain there is the distinct possibility that someone else (an insecure boss, an antagonistic peer, a hostile subordinate) will use that vulnerability to gain advantage or power.

Here are some examples of how undefended vulnerability may be misinterpreted or manipulatively exploited:

- "Sam shouldn't be promoted because he's not sure of himself." In reality Sam may simply have had the openness and the intelligence to re-examine his own views.

- "Mary can't be trusted — she

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flies off the handle." The fact may be that Mary has expressed appropriate anger in a situation in which anger may have contributed to clarity and understanding.

• "Bill is too close to his subordinates." In fact Bill may be an effective, empathetic manager who understands and responds to his subordinate's concerns without demeaning himself or lowering work standards.

• If Sam, Mary and Bill do not identify and confront these issues, if they do not take a stand, their careers may suffer. If they are vulnerable at the wrong times or with the wrong people they may "learn" to armor themselves, to become invulnerable rather than resilient. Unless one is able to defend his/her rights and values he/she cannot afford to be vulnerable.

Process learning and its many variations — team building, the managerial grid, some forms of behavior modeling and assertiveness training — facilitate learning which strengthens confidence and competency and thereby supports the individual's capacity to engage with others with vulnerability.

Organization Development, which most of the social critics haven't yet experienced or analyzed, is a macro-system expression of these same values. The sales department has to be open (vulnerable) enough to take in and respond to the needs of manufacturing. It also must be sufficiently clear about its mission and its boundaries to resist pressures which diminish its unique worth and the benefits of its specialized capacities. If the sales department becomes too much like manufacturing (or inappropriately responsive) it may accept rigid product standardization when its customers require increased flexibility. This kind of responsiveness may well reduce organizational effectiveness and long-term profitability.

Similarly, if managers are unwilling to express views which are at odds with the mainstream of organizational thought then their creativity and their contribution to decision-making may be diminished.

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It is neither combative nor naive to stand up for what you believe is true. The concept of human rights which is a part of assertiveness training rhetoric may at times seem precious or pretentious. However, the individual's ability to value and defend his/her ideas, personal integrity and unique resources has both pragmatic and humanistic worth. Diversity is a requirement for the maintenance of a dynamic organization. Diversity cannot be sustained unless individuality and the rights of the individual are protected.

The fact that process learning supports open, responsive relationships, the fact that assertiveness training is concerned with human resources and rights, the fact that these methods have been influenced by theories which value life-oriented interaction and diversity causes one to wonder why they are viewed with alarm.

SUMMARY CRITICISM: *Process training is gonna getcha if you don't watch out.*

What's really bothering the so-

cial critics? What are they afraid of? Mostly they're worried about manipulation. Organizations, they reason, want things to run smoothly. The "trainer-facilitator-personnel-OD-human resource development" types and their methods are the tools of the corporate elite. De Mott believes that the trainer, who he sardonically calls *Dr. Process*, is on a personal power trip. Lasch takes a broader view. He believes our methods are designed to seduce "the workers" into a trusting relationship in which they will cooperate without demanding too much. The reason that he worries about McGregor's ideas is that he believes they have become the basis for participative palliatives used to tranquilize the appropriate rage of the exploited organization members.

Management training, in the eyes of the many social critics, is a mechanism for teaching managers how to keep the lid on things — how to get as much as possible while giving as little as possible. On the one hand, professional

managers, say the critics, are being taught to be tough, invulnerable and self-serving. On the other hand, they must also learn to develop a pseudo-caring climate, they must develop "human relations" skills. Maccoby¹⁰ has described the disastrous results of this dissimulation in his characterization of the *Gamesman* as a hollow caricature of a caring, self-possessed, human being. Training, according to the critics, has made a direct contribution to this sorry state.

RESPONSE: *The joining.*

The critics are ignoring the people, the sources and the values which have shaped our field. We, too, need to stay in touch with the foundations of the methods we employ. Process learning and, more recently, team building and organization development methods, are rooted in the interactive, experimental learning laboratories which were initially designed to understand small group dynamics not to change them. Lewin and the originators of group dynamics were

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"Assertiveness Training . . . in the hands of one who has no knowledge of process learning . . . may be dangerous."

concerned with social change and with human development.

Role-playing, a core technique in behavior modeling and assertiveness training — was invented by Jacob Moreno as a way of freeing the spontaneity and creativity of his students and patients. It was a part of his search for mechanisms for achieving an open, human community. It is a methodology which encourages experimentation and self-discovery.

Active listening skills, which are closely associated with process methods and action learning, are grounded in the humanistic values of Carl Rogers.

In the 1920s Roethlisberger and Mayo began a search for more socially valid forms of industrial organization which is being carried on today in new "Quality of Work Life" programs and group development activities. If the purpose of the corporate elite is to use these methods to exploit the worker they are failing. Employees are more involved in decision making, their rights are more protected and their personal mobility more supported than ever before.

Robert Blake, Herbert Shephard, Jack Gibb and dozens of other contemporary practitioners who were seasoned in small group learning processes, constructed and reconstructed training instruments, experimented with leaderless groups and built new process learning systems. They began to explore the application of what they knew to organizations. Warren Bennis, Dick Beckhard and the late Douglas McGregor studied and applied process methods to the administration of larger systems. All of these endeavors and the people engaged in them support open systems, encourage interaction, and value the individual.

These are the roots of human resources development. Influenced by behaviorists, informed by Gestalt methods, enriched by general systems theory; process learning methods and the humanistic values which support them are still at the

center of what we do.

Assertiveness Training or behavior modeling in the hands of one who has no knowledge of process learning, who has no well-defined value system to guide his/her actions, may be dangerous. A facilitator of team building activities who is uninformed regarding the theoretical foundation of the instruments and methods he/she is applying is simply unqualified to function as a trainer.

The training or organization development practitioner who uses the technology of our field to contribute to the development of self-absorbed, navel-contemplating narcissists or of selfish, invulnerable robots, is either innane, incompetent or malicious. To the extent that our peers or our organizations support or fail to weed out inanity, incompetence or malevolence we, too, should view the situation with alarm.

We need to establish agreed-upon standards and clear-cut criteria for judging the programs we install and the methods we use. We need to remain open to criticism. We need to remain clear about the limitations and potential distortions of the methods we use. We also need to defend our values and value our resources. Despite our critics' concerns, the values of our field do not support "teaching" or facilitating methods which lead to manipulation, self-indulgence or exploitation. We, in human resources development, have chosen a field which requires openness and vulnerability. We can only sustain that vulnerability by defining and standing up for ourselves and our beliefs. Our beliefs must, in turn, be supported by methods and strategies which are rooted in sound theory and which are applied with rigor.

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