

# A Review of Training Fundamentals

## Is Your Training Wasteful and Perhaps Even Harmful ?

M. Gene Newport

Since World War II, management literature has included numerous articles dealing with various facets of training in industry. And, the abundance of such articles has often led to conditions of "information indigestion" where the quantity of available data was far greater than that which could be assimilated, evaluated, or utilized. As a result, some companies have found themselves in the proverbial situation of not being able to see the forest for the trees. This condition, however, has not prevented them from pressing onward and upward under the banner that proclaims, "Training is Good."

Following various themes such as, "the costs of training are inescapable," or, "learning is continuous and must be directed," or, "a business is only as

good as its people," these companies have continued to contribute to the rapidly expanding training budgets of American industry. They have increased their training staffs, added training facilities, employed more "name" instructors and consultants, and continued to send their select personnel to outside seminars held in a variety of aesthetic settings. Yet, in many cases, such actions may have done more harm than good. In fact, it would appear that some companies have literally poured their training dollars down the drain until they are now approaching the ultimate—the maximization of zero. The reasoning behind this belief is quite simple. The fundamentals of training have often been overlooked, or disregarded, in favor of more expedient or glamorous

*Dr. M. Gene Newport*

*Professor of Management, University of Nebraska at Omaha. Active as a consultant in training and development and has published numerous articles here and abroad.*

approaches such as the following.

### **The Smorgasbord Approach**

Participants in programs offered under this approach are like guests at a smorgasbord. When confronted with a display of sumptuous food, they sample everything, but seldom eat a lot of any one item. Similarly, smorgasbord training can offer a menu of diversified programs. However, participants seldom acquire a depth of understanding in any one area and, therefore, face the possibility of becoming shallow generalists. Yet, this potential danger does not seem to concern those companies that continue to utilize this approach.

### **The Bandwagon Approach**

Several common examples tend to illustrate how this approach might develop. One company, for instance, may hear through the grapevine that a competitor is conducting a certain type of training program. In another situation, a training director may attend a conference where he learns that a particular training method is being used on a widespread basis. Or, articles in the literature may discuss the satisfactory experiences of one company that employs a rather unique approach in solving its training problems. Regardless of the reason, however, the bandwagon approach is characterized by a willingness to follow the crowd or be swept along with the tide. As a result, there is little attention given to the more objective approach of determining training needs followed by the development of specific programs to fit such needs.

### **The Crisis Approach**

The philosophy underlying this approach seems to imply that training is not needed until a crisis develops. For example, if a company's accident rate is too high, more training is offered

in the techniques of accident prevention. Similarly, if costs are increasing, communication is faulty, or there is a shortage of promotable talent, additional training is also given. However, it should be noted that this approach does not attempt to determine why a certain crisis has developed. Instead, training is usually offered to everyone in those departments where crises have been noted. Without a doubt, the benefits of this approach are questionable since training becomes remedial rather than preventive in nature.

### **The Excursion Approach**

Advocates of this approach seem to perceive a correlation between the benefits received and the distance traveled to participate in training activities. To these individuals, a program held 1,000 miles from the home office is twice as good as one only 500 miles distant. Or, foreign seminars are far more beneficial than those held in the United States.

A second correlation seems to appear when one compares the distance traveled to a program with the positions held by those individuals in attendance. Presidents, for example, may be virtually unrestricted in their travels to participate in conferences and seminars. Vice-presidents, on the other hand, may be limited to a certain number of programs per year, but have no limitations on the distance to be traveled. As the scope of authority decreases, however, so does the distance that can be traveled. Thus, at lower levels, an excursion may involve attendance at a program held no more than five miles from the plant or office.

The limitations of training under this approach should be quite obvious. First, little attention is given to determining the specific training needs of individuals. Instead, those who attend various programs are usually selected solely because of their positions in the

organization. Secondly, fewer people can receive training under this approach due to the high costs per man. Finally, there is no cumulative effect to the training since it is conducted on such a sporadic basis. Consequently, when activities under this approach are not integrated with an overall training plan, the results are definitely subject to question.

### Back to the Fundamentals

A cursory examination of the preceding approaches to training should indicate the lack of attention to a few basic fundamentals. In this respect, however, the following discussion offers little that is new or different. Instead, the purpose is to review those basic requirements deemed necessary in establishing and administering effective training programs.

### Creating a Climate for Learning

Before any training activity can hope to be truly effective, a climate that is conducive to learning must be established. The Whirlpool Corporation has suggested that such a climate should include the following factors:

1. Both superior and subordinate are fully aware that an individual develops primarily through the performance of his job—if the job is planned to foster growth.
2. The subordinate recognizes that he is responsible for his own development—and that no one else can develop him. Further, he recognizes that growth is largely the result of a planned effort that he alone can initiate and sustain—and that an essential part of his own growth is his acceptance of decision-making responsibilities, along with the risks that these entail.
3. There is a mutual understanding of the specific areas of responsibility involved in the job and the standards of performance that the

subordinate is expected to meet.

4. The superior recognizes that a major part of his skill in managing lies in providing a climate that permits growth, and that the chief characteristic of this climate is a willingness on his part to delegate responsibility. It follows, therefore, that the subordinate must be free to err and must be prepared to accept, within reason, the consequences of his mistakes.<sup>1</sup>

As might be expected, a climate of this type is beneficial in stimulating individual participation during a program as well as continued self-development after the completion of a formal training session. Consequently, the creation of such an environment cannot be overlooked.

### Determining Training Needs

A necessary prelude to the development of any training program involves a systematic determination of the needs to be met through that program. Although the benefits associated with this fundamental activity are often disregarded, they have been cited for quite some time. For example, consider the following advice as offered in 1940:

The need for a training program is always indicated by the existence of some particular condition or group of conditions, or by some situation which, if improved or modified, will increase the efficiency with which the work of an organization is performed. To the extent to which these situations or conditions are properly sized up, it becomes possible to formulate training objectives and to make plans for a training program which will be designed to bring about improvements in definite and specific ways.<sup>2</sup>

A survey of the methods used in identifying training needs indicates

many possible approaches. These include performance appraisals, interviews and counseling, evaluations of previous training, executive inventories, replacement charts, opinion and attitude surveys, and manning tables. Of these approaches, performance appraisals seem to hold the most promise when used in a proper manner.

Through the use of appraisals, progress can be measured in two ways. First, an individual's on-the-job performance can be appraised in order to identify deviations from established standards. Training can then be considered as one means of correcting unsatisfactory performance. Secondly, appraisals provide a method for assessing an individual's ability to apply his training on-the-job. To be most effective in these areas, however, the results of performance appraisals must be discussed between superiors and subordinates. Such discussions not only let subordinates know where they stand, but are also an aid in identifying possible courses of action to be followed in overcoming any weaknesses that exist.

### **Establishing Objectives**

Someone once wrote, "objectives are like targets—make sure you have one before you start shooting." Needless to say, this advice is quite applicable in the development of training programs. Once training needs have been identified, specific objectives must be established to direct programs toward such needs. In other words, what is the purpose for conducting a particular program? Is it to be a motivational device for more comprehensive training at a later date? Is it to offer a broad survey of a particular field? Or, is it to be only one part of a total training plan? In any event, questions of this nature cannot be answered satisfactorily until the objectives for a given program have been defined.

### **Developing the Program**

In the development of any training program, many questions must be asked. For example, what subject matter should be used? Who should teach in the program? Where should the sessions be held? Over what length of time should the program extend? Or, what teaching methods and training aids should be employed? Some organizations experience difficulties in answering these and other questions solely because they identify neither training needs nor objectives to meet such needs. Consequently, there is little direction to their efforts. As discussed previously, however, these questions can be answered satisfactorily when training needs and objectives have been clearly defined.

### **Evaluating the Program**

The process of evaluation is extremely important to the success of any training activity. This is indicated quite clearly in the following statement:

After having determined needs for training or for a new piece of equipment; after having established very specifically the objectives in either case; and after having selected the procedures and methods of installation or presentation—one more task remains to be accomplished, namely, how well is the program or the equipment doing what it is supposed to do.<sup>3</sup>

As should be recognized, evaluations provide a company with an opportunity to measure the contributions of a given program. Unfortunately, however, this benefit may not be realized by some companies due to the methods of evaluation that are employed. For example, consider the following approaches which are used by various organizations:

1. A tabulation and analysis of opin-

- ions—given either by trainees or by their superiors—through questionnaires, interviews, or informal discussions.
2. Recording the regularity of attendance at training classes along with the number of insistence of requests for more training.
  3. Tests over the materials covered in a program.
  4. Determining the amount of training accomplished in terms of hours in class and ground covered.
  5. Measuring and/or observing the degree to which teaching follows the laws and conditions of learning.

While each of the above methods may play some role in the evaluation of training activities, they are limited in one important respect. That is, they do nothing to measure an individual's application of training to the job since evaluations of this type can only be

completed after an employee has resumed his normal duties. And, in this respect, performance appraisals still hold the most potential for such measurement since an individual's performance can be observed over a period of time.

### Summary

The benefits associated with training in industry have been widely accepted for approximately 25 years. However, many of these benefits are not realized by those organizations that fail to consider a few basic guidelines. In fact, these companies may actually do more harm than good as they pursue various fads of the moment. To avoid this possibility, companies seeking maximum benefit from their training dollars must return to, and follow, those fundamentals of training that have proven successful over the years.

### References

1. Glenn D. Clark. "Creating Conditions for Growth on the Job," *Personnel*, Jan.-Feb., 1961, pp. 27-28.
2. Frank Cushman. *Training Procedure*, John Wiley and Sons, 1940, p. 27.
3. *Social Science for Industry: Proceedings of a Seminar on Training and Human Relations in Industry*, Stanford Research Institute, 1954, p. 27.

## Michigan Practical Experience

As a project in applied field training senior students in Ferris Industrial Production Technology program are helping a Big Rapids concern solve a problem in the sole department of one of its plants. The project will give them practical experience from an industrial engineer's assistant's point of view of the layout and flow process

of 14 sequences of operations in preparing soles for shoes and stacking them in batches of six pairs. When they finish they will make recommendations which they hope will improve material flow, better housekeeping, decrease operator fatigue, and reduce operation costs.

