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Issues

Tell Us What You Think

In his letter below, Thomas L. Quick argues that even though the corporate mentality often treats its human assets as interchangeable and expendable, trainers should work to distance themselves from that attitude. He urges trainers to transcend corporate shortsightedness, "however subtly," and work to provide trainees with portable skills, skills that may in fact make workers valuable imports to other companies.

He says that he is not advocating countercultural activities. And training, in any event, makes an employee more marketable. But where should the trainer draw the line between his or her responsibility to an employee's personal and professional development and activities that may be against the corporation's interests? How transcendent, or how countercultural, can he or she be? Do you have any rules, implicit or explicit, concerning where you should draw the line?

Let us know what you think. Send your opinions, short or long, to "Issues," *Training & Development Journal*, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.

Transcendent Responsibilities

When I joined corporate life in the 1950s, I felt as if I had contracted for a lifelong association. If I performed well, I could expect to be with my company for the rest of my working life. When, after seven years, I left voluntarily, I experienced guilt. It was painful.

In contrast, when my job was phased out in 1982, and I was

booted out, there was no guilt on the part of my employer of 21 years. I had served my usefulness, and I was now expendable.

The short-term perspective rules; many people, no matter how long and faithful their service, find themselves expendable. That's the way it's going to be.

It would be wonderful if we in human resources could persuade management to take a decidedly longer-range view of our people assets, developing and nurturing human resources not only for next year but for years to come. Good luck. That doesn't seem likely (although who would have predicted the fall of the Berlin Wall?).

Meanwhile, the unfortunate view that people are expendable and interchangeable does have an impact on trainers. For one thing, we have an obligation to distance ourselves, however subtly, from corporate practices that are injurious and stupid. We are often seen as representatives, even mouthpieces, of management. We must be careful not to be seen as endorsing the short-sighted human resource policies of our bosses. Otherwise, we will lose credibility in the eyes of our trainees; we will certainly encounter resistance from them.

But in a larger and more positive sense, we trainers have an obligation to help our trainees meet their personal-growth needs, which may transcend the requirements of the corporation. Our trainees, in this mobile and uncertain age, need portable skills, and they depend on us to help them to build those skills.

Let me draw on my own field of motivation for an example. In many corporate training programs, motivation of people at work is dealt with in a highly perfunctory or theoretical manner. The corporate message may be that such training is not terribly important. In fact, it is the essence of management: managing the motivation of people.

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The trainer must look at the content of the program and ask, "Am I simply going along with what the corporation approves, or should I be doing something above and beyond to make sure that my trainees are properly equipped with the skills they may need elsewhere?"

I'm not suggesting or advocating countercultural activity, but perhaps some transcendent responsibilities for the trainer.

Thomas L. Quick
New York, New York

Humanism Versus Behaviorism

I am a humanist. That is, I am someone who values the idea of holistic education, the kind that emphasizes the development of all parts rather than the overdevelopment of a select few. When I am able to set aside my unfailing beliefs, however, I begin to wonder just how important humanistic education is to the training environment.

If the goals of humanistic education are to develop people who are able to adapt to change and strive for self-actualization, how are those goals compatible with organizations whose goals and training programs are behavioral (supervisory-skills training, management by objectives, just-in-time production, and statistical quality control, for example)? Humanistic training, in fact, stands in direct contrast to the behavioristic training. While the behaviorist would arrange "contingencies of reinforcement," humanists would rely on the learner to produce and measure change—that is, rely on the learner's inner motivation as a basis for improvement.

Just how practical is it to implement a program where the trainees decide what is to be learned, and the job of the trainer is to guide or to facilitate their learning? That

question is not easily answered, especially when you consider how many training programs are around.

Training programs for the most part are based on perceived needs. Those needs usually come from some sort of assessment, real or imaginary, that identifies areas for improvement. Programs then are organized, and employees are asked or assigned to participate. Based on that somewhat typical scenario of establishing training programs, two questions come to the humanist's mind:

- where is the trainee involved in curriculum development?
- for those who are assigned training, how are their needs being met?

Those basics of humanistic instruction seem easy to violate even before the program has begun.

What's a trainer to do?

If we bring Malcolm Knowles into the discussion, we can make a defense of humanistic training. In *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy*, Knowles characterizes humanistic education as "a concern for the development of persons, a deep conviction as to the work of every individual, and faith that people will make the right decisions for themselves if given the necessary information and support. It gives precedence to growth of 'people' over the accomplishment of 'things' when these two values are in conflict. It emphasizes the release of human potential over the control of human behavior."

As trainers we need to step back and really look at what we are seeking to accomplish.

The first question we need to ask our companies is, "Just how serious are we about the development side of T&D?" If we really listen to what Knowles is saying—that the development of the individual is more important than that of the masses, and that ultimately individual development will lead to an improved society—then we had better begin

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now to evaluate what we offer our trainees.

Although that kind of development is not easily measurable and there is not always time to assess and plan individual learning activities, we must realize—and help our CEOs to realize—the importance of this kind of training. If we want to foster creativity and innovation within our organizations, we will need to develop the only ones who can bring those things about—our employees.

*Mary Cockill Landis
Pennsylvania State University
Fogelsville, Pennsylvania*

More on the Tribe

A few points may be added to Ron Cacioppe's otherwise excellent review ("Bringing the Tribe Into the Bureaucracy," December 1989).

Whereas a tribe worked toward the survival of its entire organization, a modern-day bureaucracy concerns itself with the aggrandizement of a few individuals (some Japanese organizations may be exceptions). All levels of a tribe were affected by both fortune and famine, but in today's organizations fortune moves most often upward and famine invariably downward. Mismanagement is commonly paid for with the livelihoods of competent workers who participated little in the firm's decision making.

Also, it is important to bear in mind the role of needs in organic and mechanistic organizations. Tribes met the fundamental needs of their organizations and, therefore, complemented the environments that sustained them. In comparison, modern organizations are rapacious. Unlike organic organizations that hunted and gathered to live, mechanistic organizations live to hunt and gather. Harmony between human organizations and their environments has been re-

placed by environmental devastation for the opulent few.

The primary goal of mechanistic organizations is profit. Human and environmental welfare are secondary. Tribal organizations were not businesses in that sense. Therein lies the pivotal difference.

*M.W. Plyler
Davidson, North Carolina*

Shared Anger

(The following is a response to December 1989's "Tell Us What You Think," which asked whether Robert Poth was correct in stating that the American workforce is becoming angry, rather than simply disenchanted. Poth's letter appeared in the same issue.)

Certainly the American workforce is angry! And Mr. Poth is quite correct. The problems are caused not only by downsizing, force reductions, and so forth, but by the all-consuming greed that has totally reversed the positions of the United States and Japan from where they were 50 years ago.

"Made in Japan" was once a synonym for gaudy, cheap articles; we, as Americans, prided ourselves on quality and things made to last. Now, we're willing to pay the highest import taxes to secure the fine quality of Japanese cars and electronic equipment rather than submit to the planned obsolescence of our own.

Workers desperately need to have pride in their work. They need to be able to say, "I did that," or "I made that part." That means they also need the opportunity to see how their contributions fit into the entire product or service.

All the relationship types of training we provide—all the methods for stress relief and human development in the workplace—are worthless until they're supported by owner and manager realization that

quality is indeed a very practical source of affluence. It is also a much more reliable one than the quick buck from shoddy products, even if it requires an initial period of unprofitable restructuring.

Sharing, a sense of belonging, understanding how your work contributes to the whole—all the things Mr. Poth addresses—are the attributes that the artisans, manufacturers, and craftspeople of our country once had. They are some of the main reasons we could be proud to be Americans.


Angry? You bet I am! I consider myself a damn good trainer, but I find it increasingly difficult to motivate people on the frequently false premise that they'll be able to be proud of what they're doing.

Angry? Who wouldn't be angry to find the very country we conquered and helped into business after World War II now doing business so well that we've become the target both of ridicule and takeover?

I would say that the people who need training most aren't in the workforce or in management; instead, they're in finance and in our own government!

*Alan Curtis
Vermont Associates
St. Johnsbury, Vermont*

In Search of Others

Would the reader from rural North Dakota who asked us how to build camaraderie with other ASTD members please send us his or her name, address, and telephone number? Our address is *Training & Development Journal*, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313. 

"Issues" is compiled and edited by Haidee Allerton. Send your views to Issues, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.