

editor's page

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"They want more Xs and Os," is a favorite lament of a confrere who edits a professional journal for physical educators. Her cryptic outburst answers two questions that obsess editors. Who is that person out there known to us as The Reader, and what on earth does he or she really want? In my colleague's case, they—the physical educators—want Xs and Os—those diagrams that show where to position team members for effective strategy. In other words, they want practical information for doing their job better. I've surveyed other editors, very informally mind you, about what readers really want. "The last thing my readers want at the end of a hard day at work is to open up their professional journal and be made to think. They want to be recharged. They want a good idea for tomorrow's presentation." But these are editors talking. What do readers say?

Recently the *Training and Development Journal*, with the help of McGraw-Hill Research, surveyed a sample of readers, and guess what "they" want? More Xs and Os. More than human interest, more than theory, more than the wisdom of gurus, more than editorials—believe it or not—TDJ readers want "practical information." I can confirm that good practical information is at a premium. It must be, or you wouldn't want more of it and there would be more available to publish. (Among the unsolicited manuscripts that we receive, theoretical articles outnumber practical articles by about five to one. Prospective authors, please take note!)

So I've edited my concept of The Reader to be The Practical Reader. But who is this down-to-earth composite being? A summary of the results of the reader survey states that "manager/supervisor was the job title most often cited by the survey respondents (26 percent). Twenty-three percent said their title is director or CEO, and 14 percent are coordinators or consultants."

Journal readers have been involved in the human resource development field for an average of 10 years. The largest segment (19 percent) works for manufacturing companies, while training and development organizations and education organizations each employ another 10 percent. Eighty percent of the respondents conduct or administer programs in management training and development, with smaller numbers involved in performance appraisal and evaluation training (65 percent), technical skills training (61 percent) and communication skills training (60 percent).

Asked to name their two toughest problems on the job, 34 percent mentioned program develop-

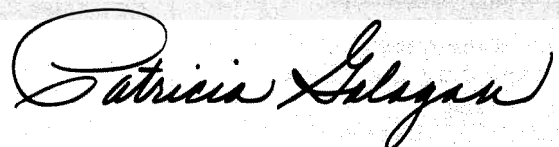
ment, implementation and evaluation. (See the articles in this issue on evaluation.) Other common problems included gaining recognition and support from management for training, and working with tight budgets. No wonder readers value practical information.

In spite of all this, I still have a nagging concern about the need for theory in the editorial content of a professional journal. To emphasize the practical at the expense of the theoretical is to conflict with one of the reasons why professionals associate: to raise and examine their own issues. The problem with case studies and other kinds of practical examples is they don't allow us to look at philosophy.

What would we make of a profession that lived by pragmatism alone? What if doctors were concerned only with treating patients and not with the prevention or cure of disease? The prestige of professions has depended upon generalized as well as specialized competence. Most professions derive their interest in the theoretical from their origins in universities, and to forsake this perspective when one enters the world of work is limiting. Surely the development of practical tools to use on the job is made possible by the existence of theories to support them.

The recession probably has inspired some of the strong interest in practicality. In easier times, clients and constituencies indulge professionals in their theoretical concerns. In hard times, clients, bosses, and professionals themselves demand results.

The tendency to oppose theory to practicality is longstanding in this country, where people pride themselves on the ability to rely on experience. I'm aware of going against a deep tradition, not to mention the views of The Practical Reader, by defending a place for logic and theory, but I believe that we should not only improve our professional skills, but that we should subject them to rational analysis.



—Editor