

The Spiral Analysis Method

As A Training Aid In Learning To Listen

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"What's the meaning of all the spirals?" asked Bill, waving in a general way at newsprint charts taped to the conference room wall. "Are you trying to teach departmental managers something about the mysteries of Galaxy 1306?" Bill is the Administrative Chief of Personnel Services. He had been briefed concerning training given to Departmental Managers, but had not himself participated in such a program.

"Not quite as ethereal as that," the trainer replied. "But we are using the SPIRAL ANALYSIS method to help this group of administrators 'learn to listen'. "This is the method of charting interviews and conversations we were telling you about," he continued. "You may remember that we were talking about the circularity pattern apparent in most conversations. Recognition that people really do talk in circles provides a means of pointing up 'feeling' areas and helps the listener understand the 'real' problem."

"These spiral charts, then, are pictures of interviews," Bill said. Then he asked, "How do you 'set up' the interviews?"

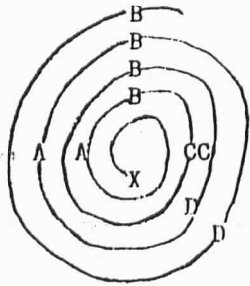
The trainer gave Bill a "hand out" sheet and went over the procedure pattern. It was headed Procedure Pattern and read as follows:

1. Members of groups are paired off.
2. Pairs adjourn to recording rooms or areas. One tape recorder is assigned to each two trainees.
3. Trainee A presents an actual problem, one that he will not mind having played before the entire training group. Trainee B acts as interviewer or confidant. The interview runs ten minutes and is recorded.
4. Trainee B and Trainee A reverse roles. Trainee B presents his problem in ten-minute interview which is also recorded.
5. Trainees identify tapes with names or initials, a grease pencil writes well on plastic reels, and return to conference room. Tape is given to group leader.
6. Tapes are played back to entire group, a SPIRAL ANALYSIS chart being made of each interview. Points influencing direction of conversation are discussed.

Then the trainer went on, "Charting interviews in this manner enables the trainer to show what happens when one individual interjects his thoughts and ideas into another person's conversation, as well as to demonstrate the impact that a re-

flection of a thought or feeling tone has upon the direction of an interview. Each time a question is asked, sympathy is shown, an argument is started, advice is given, disapproval is indicated, an idea or person is belittled or ridiculed, or a thought is

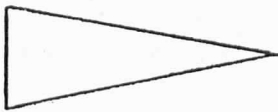
SPIRAL ANALYSIS SYMBOLS



Spiral pattern which, in general, may be used to chart an interview. Points A, B, C, and D indicate subjects which the "talker" has repeated. An area such as B might indicate an area of emphasis.



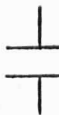
To signify that the "talker" has asked the "listener" a question.



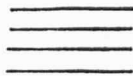
An interjection by the "listener" involving probing, interpretation, reassuring, advising, arguing, etc.



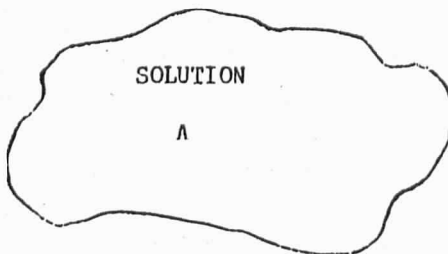
Indicates a reflection of feeling or feeling tone.



A pause or silence.



Used to portray the process of testing. "Talker" tests "listener" to find out how much he dares to tell or "talker" tests his own suggested solutions.



Points out areas of insight or suggested solutions.

interpreted, something happens to the conversation. This something almost invariably leads the talker away from what he is talking about.

"As he leaves his own trend of thought, he either talks about the thought the listener has interjected or some plain and fancy 'wheel spinning' or schizophrenic double talk takes place.

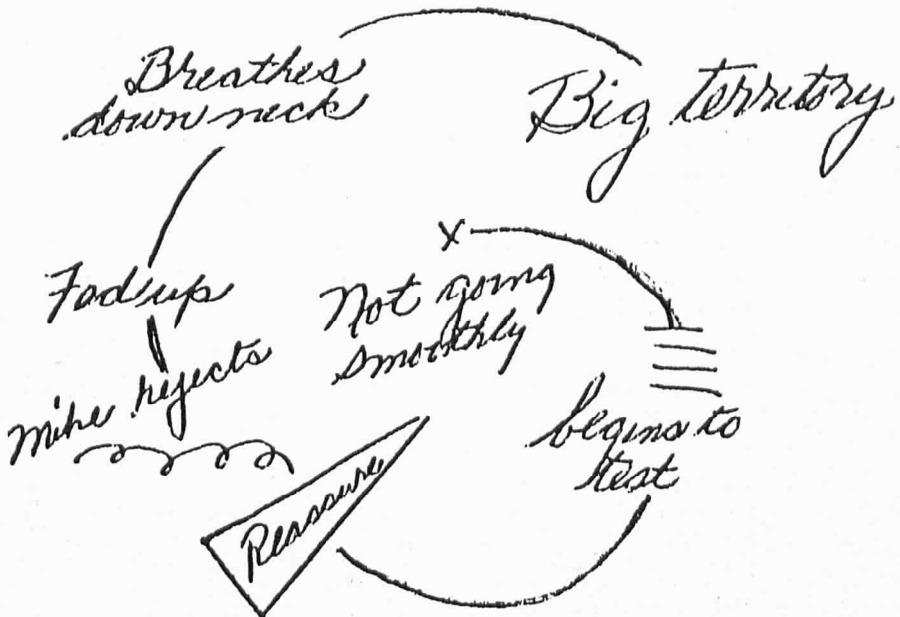
"On the other hand, each time the listener is able to reflect *feeling tone* the interviewee or talker apparently has an opportunity to see his own problem brought into better focus. Playback of the interview usually demonstrates the positive effect of a proper reflection. Perhaps the best way to illustrate what we are talking about is to actually chart an interview."

The following interview and illustrations are from the training tapes.

Mike: I don't know exactly where to begin but things haven't been going as smoothly in our offices as I would like to see them go and I don't really know how to handle the problem.

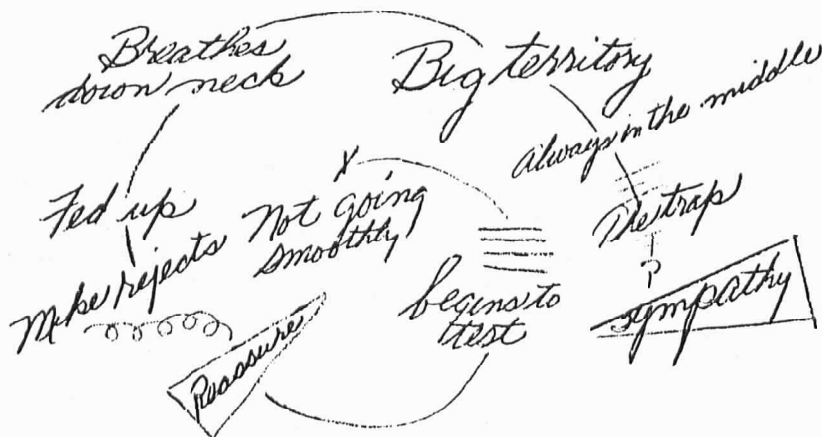
Jerry: Oh, things are probably not too bad, Mike, I know you. (*Pause*) You think you've got a problem though —

Mike (*interrupting*): Well, it's not exactly a problem, I guess, things could be worse, but I'm getting a little fed up on trying to coordinate things in our field units and at the same time having the head office breathing down my neck. You know, this is a big territory.



(The chart on page 15 shows that Mike started out to gingerly explore his problem with Jerry. Rather than let Mike explore his own situation, Jerry interrupted Mike and in doing so, reassured, but also in a subtle way, belittled Mike and his problem. Jerry's remark seemed to block the progress of Mike's conversation and Mike "gyrated" briefly before trying to come back to the problem area.) It's kinda hard on a guy to always be in the middle. You're about in the same spot I am, Jerry. How do you feel about this? Do you ever have the same kind of trouble?

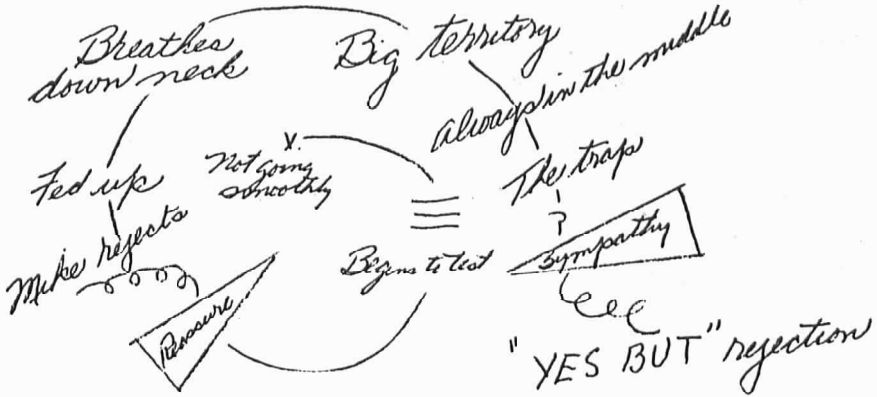
Jerry: Do I? Seems like I'm always getting blamed by the men if I do and blamed by the boss if I don't. Yeah, it gets pretty rough, Mike, but I guess that's what we get paid for.



(Mike, as we see, went back to testing, trying once more to find a way in which he could state his real problem. When we become sensitive listeners we find that in almost every conversation where a problem area exists, the talker goes through a testing process to see if the listener is really willing to hear the bad news. At this point Mike laid a trap for Jerry. Jerry fell into it. Jerry thought that Mike wanted his question answered. Maybe Mike thought so, too, but our recording shows us that this was not the case. Let's listen.)

Mike: Well, I guess you're right, Jerry. The job we hold in our organization is inbetwixt and between but, somehow or other I don't think I get paid to take it on the chin as much as I seem to have to.

(Here Mike gave Jerry the "Yes, but" treatment. "Yes, but" is a cue to the sensitive listener that what the talker may really mean is, "You're dead wrong but I am too polite to tell you I think so." It may be viewed as the polite rejection and MIKE SHOWED THAT HE ACTUALLY DID NOT WANT HIS PREVIOUS QUESTION ANSWERED as illustrated in the next chart.)

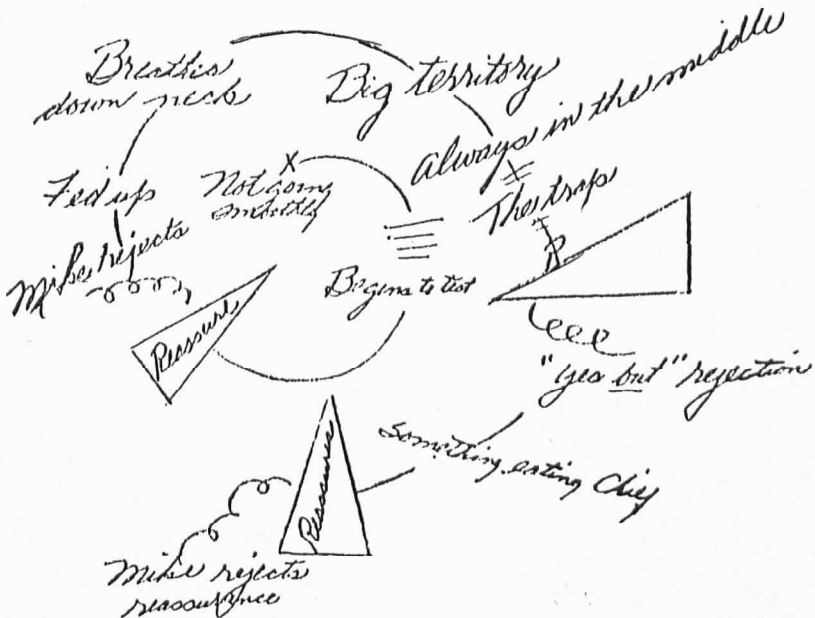


Mike (continuing): You know, I think something's eating on the Chief, the way he has been acting lately, but I guess I would, too, if I had all the troubles on my shoulders that he has. I've got enough responsibility.

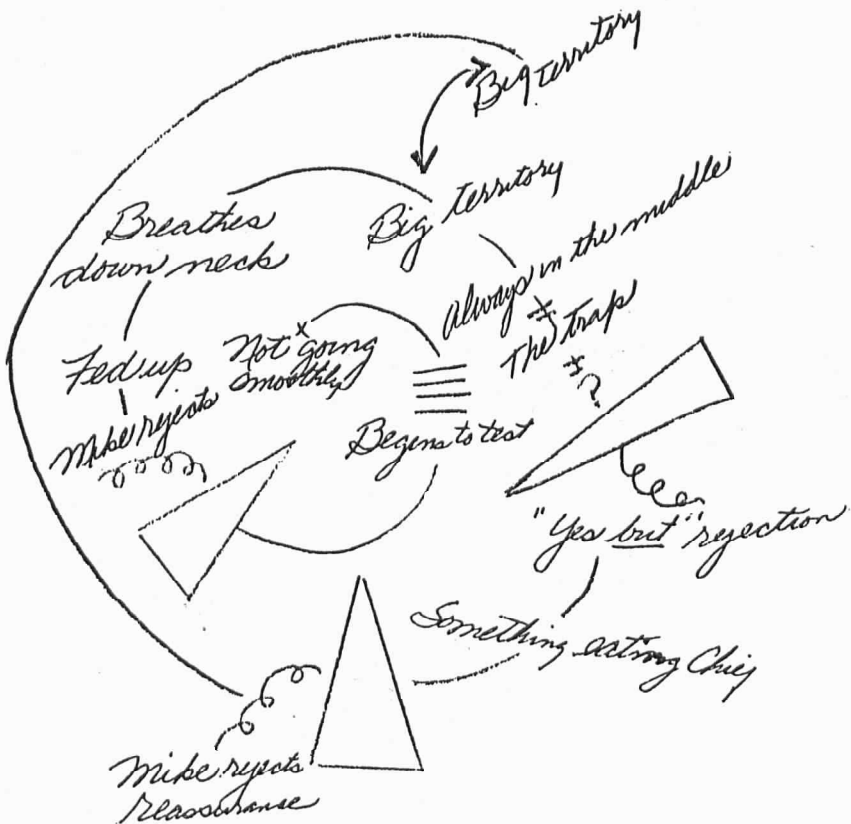
Jerry: I'll say, we all have. It's this heavy responsibility that causes a man to worry.

(Here Jerry interrupts Mike's testing process again to attempt to reassure him. Mike had just mentioned the Chief with some feeling which should have been a signal to Jerry that perhaps the real problem was beginning to show through.)

Mike: Well, I'm not really worried. I'm not the worrying kind. A guy can do so much, he does it, that's all he can do. It would take ten men to really cover my territory.



(Mike rejected Jerry's reassurance and ran away from the real problem. We note by the chart that the conversation has completed the circle. In charting a ten-minute interview, conversations go around the circle at least five or six times and frequently more often. The trainer or group leader indicates a turn of the circle or spiral each time the talker repeats or re-emphasizes a point. For example, in Mike's interview with Jerry, the circle was completed when Mike came back to the subject of the big territory.)



In utilizing the spiral analysis method, it seems to be more effective to use actual problems of trainees. Role playing, though often valid, frequently fails to indicate movement and direction as in the case when an actual problem is discussed. Trainees are asked to choose problems of a minor nature, the kind they do not mind having played back to the group. Early interviews, therefore, often deal with such problems as (1) trouble with the neighbor's dog, (2) difficulties in commuting, (3) problems involved in purchasing a new automobile, etc.

In dealing with administrative groups trainers find that second or third interviews tend to be more work centered once a feeling of trust has been established.

"As I heard this," Bill said, "Jerry let Mike talk more than half of the time anyway, at least that's something. But according to the chart everything he said was wrong. Do your trainees ever say anything right?"

"This was an early interview," the trainer answered. "Interviews get better as the sessions go along. It is not easy though, to break a lifetime habit. Learning to listen doesn't just happen. It takes conscious effort. We help people learn the skills. They have to develop facility in these skills in their back home situation."

Are there any guides concerning what a listener should do and how he should do it?" asked Bill. The trainer nodded and picked up a chart from the table. It read: DEVELOP AN ACCEPTANT ATTITUDE, AN ABILITY TO ATTEND, LISTENING SKILLS AND AN ABILITY TO REFLECT FEELING.

"First, I have to be willing to put myself aside," the trainer explained, "and to let you say what you want to say in the way you want to say it. I have to react to you in a sincerely uncritical manner if you are to overcome your anxieties and tell me what you really think.

"Second, I have to pay attention to what you are saying. I must do this in a way that I catch your nonverbal communications as well as your verbal. I must do this in a way so that you know that I know how you feel.

"Third, I must develop my listening skills to the point where I can really listen to what you are saying instead of sailing away into my own internal thoughts. I must attempt to neither think up arguments to combat you nor to find ways of reassuring you. I have to listen in such a way as to ascertain your meaning and feeling as nearly as my human limitations permit.

"Finally, I hold the mirror of yourself up to yourself by telling you as accurately as I can what you say you think and how you say you feel. I must be careful not to interpret or to interject my own ideas into this reflection."

"I think I understand that part of it," Bill said. "The subject of learning to listen has been written up in many of the management journals and the rules on your chart seem to be in accord with what many of these authors are saying. The thing I am interested in is hearing an interview where one of your trainees consciously uses these principles."

By studied coincidence the trainer had a later interview with Mike in which Mike used the same problem as he had in his interview with Jerry. The listener in this case was Al Randell who had the benefit of having had two previous interviews charted before teaming up with Mike. A portion of Mike's interview with Al follows:

Mike: This is the same problem I brought up to Jerry during an earlier interview in these sessions and I still don't know the answer. But honestly, Al, I've got a problem in the office. Things aren't going nearly as smoothly as I would like to see them. I'm getting a little fed up trying to coordinate things in our scattered field units and getting kicked in the teeth by topside at the same time. You know, this is a darn big territory I have to cover.

It's tough to be the guy who is always in the middle, yet I guess you're like Jerry and me, Al, you're kinda in the same spot, too. Do you have this same trouble?

(As we see, Al up to this time had not interrupted Mike's testing process. As he had done with Jerry, Mike at this point "set the trap.")

Al *(after a short silence)*: I see, at this point you're getting a little fed up. Coordinating the scattered field units is a pretty difficult thing and it's kind of hard on a guy being in the middle.

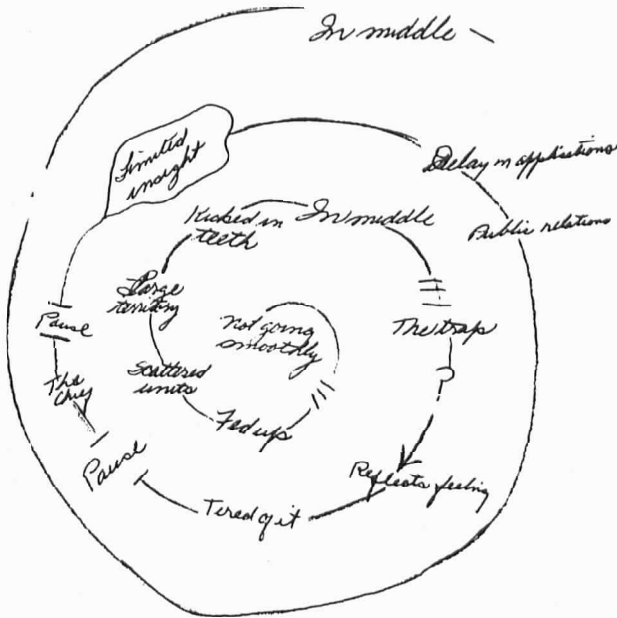
(Al has tried to capture Mike's "feeling tone" and has avoided answering Mike's trap question. The recording will tell us how well this worked.)

Mike: You're darned right it's hard on a guy and I don't mind telling you that I'm getting tired of it. *(Slight pause)*. If the Chief recognizes the spot I'm in, he doesn't let me know. *(Pause)* Of course, I guess he has his troubles, too, but whenever he gets a complaint from upstairs he certainly loses his objectivity, I'll tell you. *(Al might reassure as Jerry had done and throw Mike off the track. Instead the recording indicates a fifteen or twenty second silence.)* The other day he called me in his office and raised heck about the delays in processing applications in our unit. He also said he had a complaint about the personnel in the Wilton office and told me he was getting sick and tired of worrying about the public relations in my division.

Well, I've got plenty to keep on top of, considering the territory that I have to cover. And another thing, if there is one thing I resent, it's having my employees condemned without a hearing. It's sure tough being in the middle.

(We notice at this point that Mike has completed the first circle in the problems spiral. Some cue or feeling that Al received during the interview must have indicated that here was the place to let Mike know that he was understood. A summary at the proper point may satisfy the talker that he is getting through and encourage the talker to develop additional problem areas and to stop talking about previously discussed, but relatively unimportant areas.)

Al: The Chief was concerned about a complaint involving delay in an application and a public relations problem in the Wilton office and instead of being objective, seemed to be condemning employees in your unit without a trial. This, you feel, points up the difficulty of keeping on top of such a large territory and of being the man in the middle.



(Al's interjection was a partial summary and reflection without interpretation.)

Mike: Yeah, and this really gets me, you know. Old Man Stillman didn't used to be like this when he first got to be Chief, but lately he's been getting worse and worse. He's got a darn big job and I don't blame him for worrying, but that's no reason he should blame our people without first determining the facts. (Pause)

Well, I went down to Wilton. I found out that we had a new employee who was on duty when some client of Senator Allen's had come in and tried to file an application. It was during the lunch hour and she was the only one on duty. Apparently he gave her a bad time. I understand that when Louie came back from lunch, I guess you know Louie, he's the office manager, he found this gal in tears. Well, the application was incomplete but Louie fixed it on up and sent it in and there was no delay in the Wilton office and there was no delay in my office, but, by golly, this thing sat around the Accounting Section for I don't know how long before it was finally processed. I told the Old Man about this, too.

Al: There was a delay in the Accounting office and you called this to Mr. Wilton's attention?

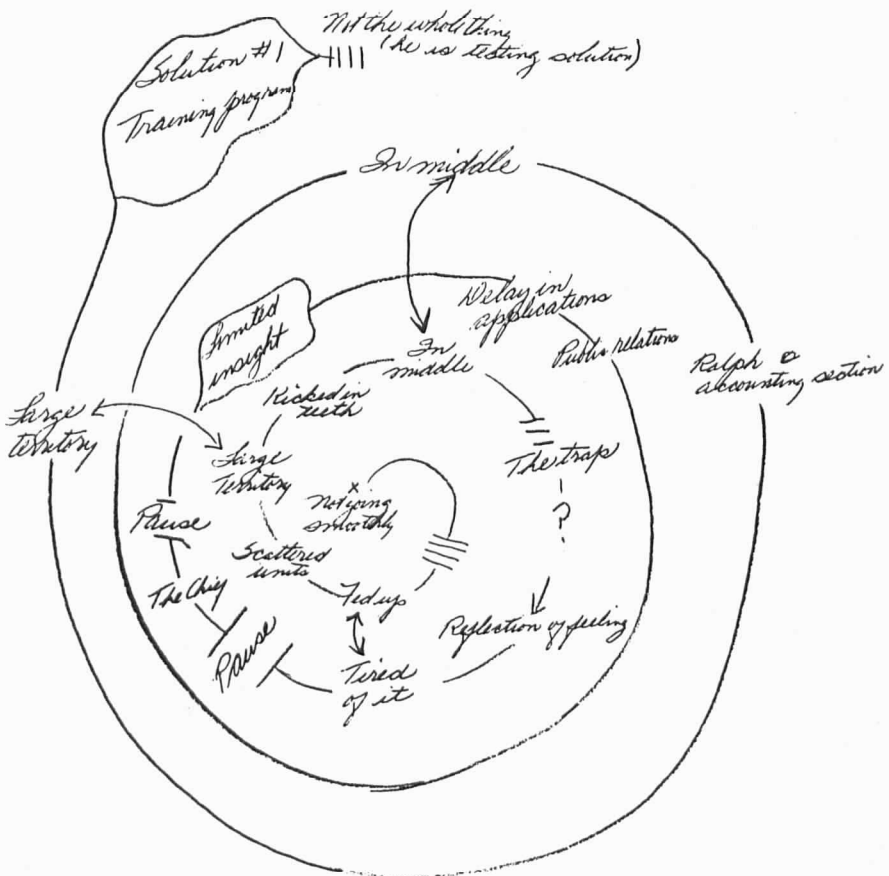
Mike: Not that it did any good. He said excuses weren't a part of good public relations. (Silence for about thirty seconds.) This probably could have been

THE SPIRAL ANALYSIS METHOD

(Continued from page 21)

avoided. Louie shouldn't have left the new gal on by herself but I can't blame Louie too much. He's really short of help. I've been going to work up a standard induction program for girls in the District offices. We've pretty good training for everyone else but we've ignored these counter girls, so I guess it's my fault rather than Louie's.

At this point Mike had developed some insight. Instead of blaming other people and conditions he had begun to recognize the problem as partially at least—his own. He then proposed a solution which is indicated on the chart below.

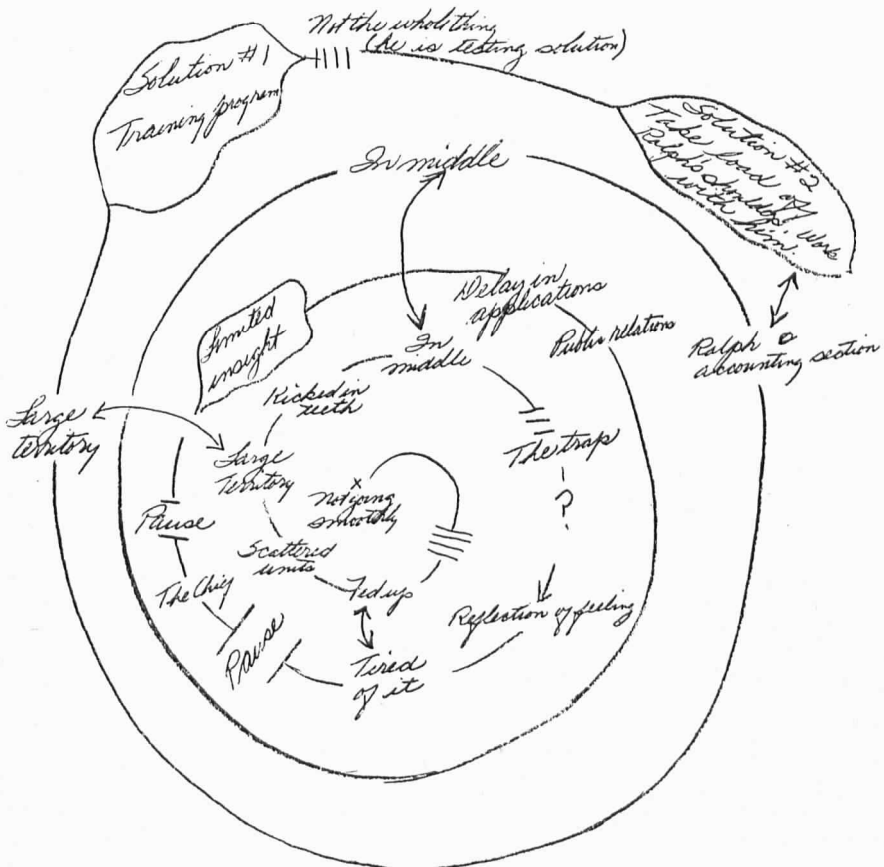


Frequently when a person suggests a solution he begins to test it. This testing usually involves exploration of the idea.

Mike: But a training program isn't the whole thing. I've been having trouble with the Accounting Section for quite a while. I don't know why I should fight with Ralph but it seems every time I pick up the phone I get in an argument with him anymore. (Pause)

I know everybody crabs at him, it's not his fault when money gets tight. But after all, I'm not to blame for all the delay. Maybe I could work some of this out with Ralph. (Here another solution is suggested.) Well, I don't know if anything can be done about it or not. Ralph is shorthanded. Still, maybe there are some arrangements that we can make to take part of the load off his shoulders. I don't know how he'll feel though when I come to see him."

COMPLETED CHART OF AL'S INTERVIEW WITH MIKE



(Continued on following page)

Although we leave Mike at this point, he seems to be on the way to working out his office problem.

"That last interview made this sound pretty easy," said Bill. "Do you mean to tell me that listening always has such a positive effect on people and that they can solve problems of this kind in just a few minutes?"

The trainer said he didn't mean anything of the kind. Mike, at the point this interview occurred, had been in a training session for eight days. During this time he may have achieved some pretty clear insights into his own actions. A deep seated problem generally takes a long time to develop and a long time to solve.

"I wasn't trying to illustrate a quick way to heaven," said the trainer, "I was simply trying to point out that by analyzing our interviews we can become aware of the actions and reactions of other people.

"When we first started to train administrative groups in the listening process, we frequently found ourselves defending the non-directive approach. Now, rather than preaching or giving principles we approach the analysis of interviews more objectively. We merely say, 'Let's see what happens.'

"We now consider it our job to try to develop sensitivity to reality. In doing this the trainee learns, just as we have, that any time we force our ideas into someone else's conversation, we distort that conversation. This is not to maintain that the effect is either good or bad. Most trainees agree that problems the talker is assisted in dealing with himself, are the problems to which solutions found seem most satisfactory."

"How long does it take to give this training?" asked Bill.

"We have been devoting from twelve to twenty hours to recording, charting, and playback," said the trainer. "This does not make interviewers out of our trainees. This does familiarize them with the listening approach. We hope it motivates them to put their learning into practice in their day-to-day work."

"How about you?" asked Bill, looking at the trainer.

"I would like to say that I am always a good listener, but if I did, I would not be telling the truth. To listen, I still must tell myself, Bill is talking and I am going to listen, really listen."

Trainees are frequently concerned with techniques. It should be clearly stated that while techniques are important, the listening process is not simply a matter of techniques. It is largely a matter of attitude. It is also a matter to which a listener must, at least in the beginning, attempt on a conscious level.