

LEADERS FOR LABORATORY TRAINING

BY GORDON L. LIPPITT
AND LESLIE E. THIS
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It is obvious to trainers using the laboratory method and sensitivity training concepts that no two training groups or programs are identical. Part of this dissimilarity is accounted for by variations in the purpose, objectives, and nature of the overall program of which the laboratory group learning experience is a part.

In addition, differences in group composition, size, sophistication, motivation, training facilities, group leaders, and numerous other similar factors combine, and interplay, to bring into sharp focus the awareness that each group has a unique learning experience.

Any training program with its specific learning opportunities and participant learnings is the result of background events, trainer background, participants' backgrounds and need, training location and program all impinging on a given session and moment to produce a training event. Whether this event (silence, leadership

struggle, conflict between two members, hostility, subgrouping, etc.) will be utilized for appropriate learning will, in large part, be determined by the skill and sophistication of the trainer.

Figure 1 indicates some of the major forces that impact on a training program continuum to provide learning experiences and opportunities. Whether this rich and potent mix, culminating in a series of training events, will be the vehicle for meaningful learning discoveries is heavily dependent upon the trainer.¹ This unique experience does not mean, however, that certain problems, group phenomena sequential phases, and group behavior patterns cannot be predicted with a fairly high accuracy. It is this predictability that has enabled the laboratory method to evolve and to be translated into a useful training technique. From 20 years of intensive use and study, a significant body of "process" knowledge and desired trainer behavior has emerged.

Drawing upon this accumulated data, this article abstracts some of the significant roles, problems,

and qualifications of the effective group trainer. The success of the laboratory method as a training innovation occurs generally only if there is a qualified professional trainer in the training group itself.

The authors are not unaware that in trainer circles there is often a tendency to treat the role of a group trainer in a mysterious fashion. His interventions and behavior are often intangible and affected by the vagaries of the group's "here and now" needs and experiences. We can observe "what has happened and what was done" — but less well predict "what will happen and what should be done." We believe the trainer's role, and the group processes with which his role is concerned, are sufficiently known and predictable to be described, explained, and guidelines established for useful trainer guidance and preparation to maximize participant learning.

Factors Affecting the Trainer's Roles

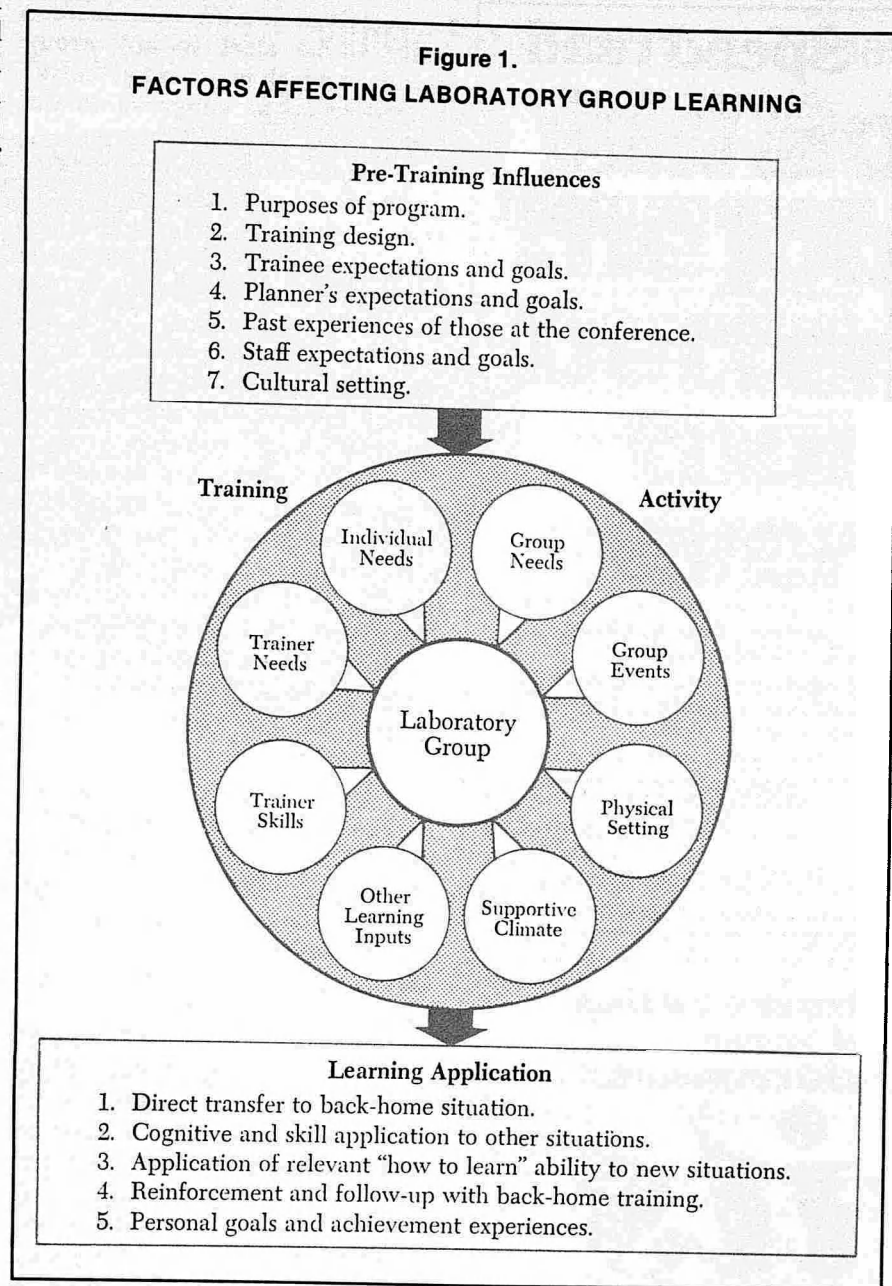
The roles of a group trainer are multiple. Whether he works in a development group in a three-day

or a four-week laboratory, he will be called upon to assume several roles that demand the utmost from his professional competency and responsibility. The execution of these roles will vary and will be conditioned by the following kinds of factors:

1. *Purposes and Design of the Training* — The way a trainer carries out his role may be partially affected by the overall purposes of the training program of which the laboratory method is a part. If the laboratory method is a part of a supervisory development program in which skills of working with employees are being practiced, and the general program focus is on supervision, this emphasis will affect the participants. On the other hand, if a trainer is dealing with a homogeneous staff unit in an organization, his role may be quite different in terms of the need to protect certain standards within the group so that learning can take place without too much "personal risk" to any member of the group.

2. *Length of Training Program* — The length of the training design will condition the different roles of the trainer. In a three-day program, the trainer leading a development group session normally needs to provide more structure than in a three-week program if meaningful learning is to occur. This structure may be built through more emphasis on creating experiences within the group deliberately slanted to help it learn. In addition, the trainer may find it desirable to be more directive in the way he opens the group in terms of his suggestions for its entering into two-level learning processes.

3. *Group Composition* — Another factor that will condition the way in which a trainer carries out his multiple roles is the composition of the group itself. For example, if a developmental group experience is being conducted for the first time in an organization, and there is little knowledge about its purpose or methods, the trainer may need to provide additional support in initiating the diagnostic concept and process as the learning curriculum. In other cases, the



group may be composed of members of an organization in which the concepts of laboratory training are known and practiced, with a resultant awareness, on the part of each member, of such training's purposes, objectives, and methodologies.

The factor of status in the group composition will also condition the trainer's role. It has been the authors' experience that the higher the status of the individual members, the less free such individuals are to "let down their hair." This has real significance for the trainer's behavior and style.

4. *Practicing Philosophy of the Trainer* — Such matters as distribution of men and women, superiors and subordinates, dispar-

ity in ages, and similar aspects of group composition should be considered by the trainer.

Different trainers have different approaches to laboratory groups. This usually results from different interpretations of the trainer role as it relates to the learning process; even though all apparently subscribe fundamentally to a similar philosophy of learning. In the continuum from "directive" to "nondirective" trainer functioning there will be numerous implications for the trainer role. Some trainers believe that the group should set its own standards and see to it that they are completely protected. Even the most "nondirective" trainer, however, will respect the professional responsi-

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bility to be alert to any group standard which in any way "hurts" an individual or subgroup in the group.

5. *Expectations of Participants* — The trainer's interventions and styles will be affected by the expectations of participants regarding the kind of training to which they will be exposed. If an improper expectation has been communicated, the trainer will want to assure himself that an adequate explanation of laboratory education is provided. On the other hand, if the group has received a valid orientation to the training, the trainer can proceed more quickly to the diagnostic learning process. Seldom does a participant have no formulated expectation — they run the gamut from valid expectations to varying degrees of false or distorted expectations.

6. *Expectations of the Training Planners* — The organization sponsoring the training will have certain goals that they see as outcomes of the training activity. The responsibility they will attempt to thrust upon the trainer to fulfill the goals of the activity planners will be a factor in the way he conducts his training group. There should generally be a linkage between the manner in which the group training is conducted and the expectations of the sponsoring organization. In some cases the sponsors may expect the group learning process to be related to the back-home situation of the trainees. In other cases, they may want to have the laboratory group learning process be as "divorced" from the job situation as possible. The differences in such planned expectations will condition the style and method of the trainer.

7. *Organizational or Personal Needs Which Initiated Program* — The laboratory education process is usually utilized for a particular purpose in a training design. A training design normally is based on fulfilling the needs of an organization or persons attending the program.² If the design evolves out of an organizational desire to improve the interpersonal competence of its employees because of a poor record of labor-management

relationships, the trainer needs to be fully cognizant of the background that led to such a design. In another circumstance, the training may be designed to provide improved skills of interpersonal communication for salesmen within a company. The company's sales may be falling and the training is seen as a step to improve the sensitivity skills of salesmen in the sales interview to both the buyer and the situation.

In some cases, the trainer will find personal needs very much in evidence. A person will have come to the training program with expectations that the laboratory group process will solve one or many of his personal problems. Such expectations on the part of either the individual or the organization sponsoring the training are of prime importance in assessing the trainer's role in the group learning.

8. *Influence of Trainer's Peers and His Profession* — The trainer's style will be conditioned by the actions of his peers in a training situation and his concept of his professional role. In most training situations, where more than one trainer is involved, a norm of trainer behavior emerges that influences the trainer's methods and style. If a norm develops during the training program that an "effective trainer" is one who uses a highly nondirective approach, this will tend to influence the trainer to operate in that fashion.

In addition, the background of one's professional training will also affect one's style. A clinical psychologist may focus on the learning experiences for individuals in the group, while a social psychologist may want to focus on the group learning aspects of the situation. An individual trainer whose background is mainly in the field of business or public administration may lean more toward relating the learning experience to the administrative or organizational process. The effects of these professional factors need to be honestly examined by those conducting laboratory group experiences.

9. *Current State of Research and Experience* — When laboratory

group training first began in 1946, the research on group behavior was limited. Since that time, however, a considerable amount of research has explored the behavior of people in groups. Numerous books and articles have been written on the dynamics of group behavior, the phases of group growth, the effect of leadership in groups, and the problems of group learning. There has been a rapid increase in the knowledge about the learning process. Studies on group learning are readily available to the laboratory group trainer. The effects of feedback on group learning, the use of dyads in group learning, the value of instrumentation, and numerous other methodologies are now available for review and assessment by a professional group trainer.

In addition, the history of some 20 years of work in the laboratory group field has provided a number of books and articles reporting research findings about the process of laboratory education in the sensitivity training group. A well-

informed group trainer will avail himself of these resources in assessing his approach, style, and intervention techniques. Each trainer will need to conduct his training based on his own skills and abilities, but these can be in accordance with validated principles and guidelines in the area of group behavior, learning, and training.

10. *Needs of the Trainer* — Every individual brings to a learning process his own needs. This is no less true of the group trainer. In some circumstances a trainer may need to meet certain status needs he has with a particular group of trainees or other trainers. In another situation, the trainer may have certain needs to carry out some original experimentation relative to his research interests. Whatever the needs, it is imperative that the trainer be as insightful as possible to his own needs and to assess their influence on his style and behavior. One of the requirements of a professional trainer in the group learning

process is that he not permit his own needs to interfere with the learning of others, but to recognize the reality of his needs and share them, when appropriate, with the members of the group for diagnosing their effects on the group process.

Multiple Roles of the Group Trainer

Several times we have indicated that the laboratory trainer has several roles to perform. We have indicated that there is no firm and fixed characterization of each of these roles. At least six of these are readily identifiable in a training program of three days' duration or longer. They are:

1. *Initiator of Diagnostic Training Concepts* — It is the responsibility of the trainer to help the group see that its own processes and problems provide much of the "curriculum" for the learning experience. In various ways he initiates the concept of the diagnostic process in the learning of the group. Initiating diagnostic procedures can be done in a "non-directive" fashion, as suggested in a paper by Roy Whitman;³ or, at the other end of the continuum, a trainer may actually spell out his responsibility in a short training program where interpersonal laboratory training groups are being used.

For example, at the beginning of a developmental group session, the trainer might say something like this:

"This is the developmental group. We will be meeting in this room for five two-hour sessions during the next three days. The purpose of this group is to provide an opportunity for group members to interact with one another in developing its group life, and to use our developing stages as material for analysis, observation, and learning about human relations.

"As indicated in the orientation session, there are four things missing from this group that are usually found in the typical everyday group.

"This group does not have a stated agenda, a designated leader, agreed-upon procedures, or a

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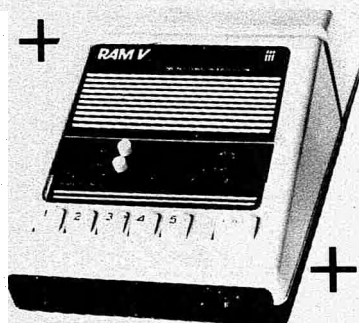
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common history. If this group finds these things necessary, it will provide them as it sees fit.

"As the trainer, I see my function as helping the group to use its experiences to learn more about human relations. I do not see my function as *the* leader, and will resist being put into that role as it would handicap me from performing my trainer function — and you from discovering emerging needs and processes."

Even this "more-directive" method of the introduction process is obviously not enough for the group to accept group diagnosis as its curriculum. In future sessions, no matter how a trainer begins the meeting, he will continue to carry out his role of initiating the diagnostic observation concept. In many ways, the innovation process used by the trainer will serve as a "prod" to the group to use diagnosis in its learning.

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appropriate Time and Level — One of the major functions of the trainer is to make appropriate diagnostic observations to the group at such times as seem most appropriate for the group's learning and ability to internalize. This does not mean that the trainer is responsible for all diagnostic observations. All laboratory trainers have as their goal the group members becoming their own diagnosticians.

At a number of points, however, a trainer will find it desirable to initiate a diagnostic observation, for any one of several reasons, or a combination of them: the observation might not be appropriately made by a member of the group; the group is not yet sufficiently sophisticated to make it; or it is neglecting this particular part of its learning experience. When the training groups are "family groups," or the training is taking place "on company site," additional demands, sensitivities, and expertise are required.

3. *Innovator of Learning Experience* — The trainer, in varying degrees, will see his responsibility for initiating various techniques and methods to make possible the maximum learning experience as the group progresses. If the group does not know how to use a particular area of interest for its own learning, the trainer may set up a "testing situation." This might be in the area of procedural suggestions, such as role-playing to test out different approaches to the situation. It might be a suggestion that the group "alternate" group observers so that everyone in the group gets a chance to experiment with the role or situation being analyzed.

There are a number of ways in which the trainer can, and should, use his own training resources to help the group in its learning experience. This does not mean, however, that the trainer should get "involved" at the task level of the group. The differentiation between innovating for maximizing learning a particular experience the group is having and becoming involved in the task is a fine distinction that requires astute judgment on the part of the trainer.

4. *Standards Protector* — In the atmosphere of the training environment and the work of the laboratory group itself, a number of standards will emerge. Such standards as diagnosing the "here and now" as against the "there and then" life of individuals will emerge. There may be times when the group will depart from this standard, and the trainer needs to be sensitive to whether or not his function is to protect it for the good of the learning experience.

Another standard that might well be protected by the trainer is the standard of "looking at the behavior" versus "looking at the motivation" of persons. This standard relates closely to the professional role of the trainer in terms of the differentiation between laboratory learning experience and that found in group therapy. In most instances the group itself will develop its own standards. The standards most relevant to the role of the trainer will be those in the area of learning atmosphere and methods related to the training objectives of the program.

5. *Initiator of Selected Group Standards for Learning* — This function of the trainer may be performed less often. Nevertheless, there are times when an individual or subgroup may be getting "hurt" by the group, and the trainer may want to suggest standards to govern the level of diagnosis or personal attack. Of course, the vulnerability of an individual or subgroup to be hurt by the group differs widely according to the personality structure of the individuals in the group. It behooves the trainer to be sensitive to these different strengths and weaknesses of individuals.

Conversely, a situation may exist when the group is being severely punished by an individual or individuals. The trainer may see some long-range consequences from this attack, and here again may raise this question of a group standard. This may occur very rarely, and, in a sense, it is the trainer protecting the group or individual from unproductive self-punishment. At such time, the need for professional training of

the trainer becomes particularly crucial.

6. *Group Member Function* — In some of the literature about laboratory training, statements have been made that the trainer “never becomes a group member.” The authors feel that this is an unrealistic interpretation of the psychology and reality of group life. The fact that the training group is a cultural unit implies that it has all the potential aspects of group identification, cohesion, and

growth. The group builds expectations for all persons in the training situation, and this includes the trainer.

Each individual in the situation exerts and receives influence. The trainer meets, exceeds, falls short, changes, and frustrates the expectations of different group members. In doing this, he becomes a “member” whom the group must handle. The trainer may be a *unique* member, but as the laboratory group matures so does each

member become unique in a number of different ways.

The trainer, of course, does not perform the typical membership function. It has been our experience that when a group has begun to “take over” its diagnostic function and begins to see the different contributions of the members, the group identifies a point in its growth when it overtly indicates that the trainer “is now a member of the training group.” At the covert level, the trainer might have been a member of the group long before the group identified this as being true. At another level, the trainer will never become the same kind of group member as the others, but does get group identification and membership to give the group its feeling of “wholeness” when it arrives at that point in its development.

Special Problems and Pitfalls of Concern for Trainers

The laboratory trainer is vulnerable to problems and “traps” that usually do not confront other kinds of trainers. As laboratory trainers get together and share their experiences, several seem to occur most frequently. The following are especially noted and should be recognized, and provided against, when designing a laboratory program:

1. *Trainer Becomes Too Directive* — One of the major problems in leading a laboratory group is the temptation of becoming too directive and acting more like a teacher than a trainer. The teaching process is a seductive one, and frequently a trainer may find himself elaborating a diagnostic observation, when in reality the group itself could analyze the observation with greater learning impact. Self-discipline and commitment to the professional aspects of the training process are guides for trainers to avoid this snare.

2. *Trainer and Group Become Too Clinical* — Another “trap” for many trainers is permitting the group to become too clinical in its diagnosis and learning. By “too clinical,” we refer to the group becoming therapeutic centered about the individuals in the group as evidenced by diagnosing motivational

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factors rather than the behavior in the "here and now." The purposes of the training group, in terms of improving interpersonal sensitivity, increasing insight, developing membership skills, and other related knowledge in human and organizational relations, make it very easy for the emphasis to become clinical. The trainer needs to watch his own motivation and that of the group to prevent such personal and clinical emphasis from becoming too dominant.

3. Trainer Becomes Too Personally Involved in the Group — If the trainer permits himself to become involved in the work life of the laboratory group, he loses much of his ability to contribute to its purposes. As indicated earlier, the trainer will become involved in the life of the group, but should *not* at the emotional level of his own personal need. The trainer should guard against his personal "agenda" becoming a part of the group agenda. Obviously, the trainer will become a part of the "talk" of the group in its discussions, and they will deal with the trainer in terms of their dependency and leadership needs. This does not mean, however, that the trainer gets himself involved in a personal way in the group life.

4. Training Group is Used in an Inappropriate Way — There are some settings in which the interpersonal focus in a laboratory training program should not be used. For example, it is the authors' conviction that unless a group can have a minimum of eight hours for interpersonal and group learning and growth, this kind of training should not be used. In any less time a group does not have an opportunity, even with special provisions for a short-program type of trainer-role, to secure appropriate learning.

Another example of an inappropriate setting occurs when the laboratory method is employed and there is no "emotional support" for the participants to utilize their learning and insights back home — or even in other phases of the training program. The use of the laboratory group should always be related to some specific organiza-

tional or trainee development purposes which are kept in mind in the design of the total learning experience. In addition, the regular conditions for effective learning should be maintained so as to realize maximum results from the use of the laboratory experience.⁴

5. Mistaking Frustration and Floundering for Learning — In the life of a training group, there will be numerous times when the group will flounder and become frustrated. On many occasions, this is a part of the group-growth process. Such occasions are appropriate when the group uses this frustration and floundering for its diagnosis and learning. If, however, the group *does not learn* from this experience, it is then inappropriate training. Some persons have incorrectly interpreted "exposure of behavior" as being synonymous with emotional disequilibrium in the training experience. Such disequilibrium is not an end, but sometimes occurs in some individuals as a means toward learning. It should not be allowed to occur, however, unless it is intricately related to the curriculum of the group as it studies its processes and learns from them.

Comments on Trainer Intervention

The trainer's role in laboratory training frequently involves him directly in the learning experiences. He may be part of a "here and now" experience, involved in a role play, a "member" of a discussion or diagnostic session, "leader" of a case study or group exercise, or an observer of the group and its processes.

At such times the trainer frequently is faced with the question "Should I intervene in the group discussion or activity, or should I let the group find its own way?" There are several guidelines that will assist the trainer in making decisions about training interventions.

1. Intervention by the trainer has as its purpose, for the most part, the learning of the group about its processes.

2. Trainer interventions may be helpful to both the individual and the group in giving support to

sonnel, philosophy, organizational administrative theories, and similar areas will provide a theoretical base on which the laboratory trainer will build his educational sophistication, philosophy, and expertise. Although a professional academic background does not guarantee training competence, the concepts and constructs that come from such study in the social sciences are indispensable aspects of his qualifications.

5. *Ability in Verbal Communications* — A laboratory trainer must be able to communicate effectively with others. One of the prerequi-

sites for any trainer is to know how to communicate at the level, and in the words and imagery, that are appropriate for the particular group he is training.

6. *Training Skills* — With the proper personality, and educational and experiential background, most training personnel can learn the training skills needed to lead effective laboratory training programs. As a prerequisite, it is advisable that any potential laboratory trainer have experience as a member of a T-Group. Specialized training skills can be acquired, after attendance at a sensitivity

training laboratory, as a member of a training-for-trainers group, through an internship program, serving as a training associate in an action-learning laboratory, and finally as a group trainer under the supervision of a senior coordinator.

These criteria are suggestive of the kinds of things that should be considered when selecting and developing persons to lead laboratory training programs. Although too obvious to discuss in detail, the important areas of readiness, interest, and willingness to work with others in this kind of training are important basic dimensions. The philosophy of training that underlies the laboratory approach is a vital part of the commitment of any potential trainer. Such a trainer should have a penetrating concept of the laboratory approach and a thorough understanding of the conditions under which it operates.

As an important innovation in the field of learning, the laboratory training philosophy, theory, and methods, in its practice, demands the highest caliber of professional competence and personal integrity.

LEADERS FOR LABORATORY TRAINING: AN UPDATE

Upon reading this article, I found five things I would have done differently were I writing the article today. These comments have not been cleared with my colleague, Dr. Lippitt.

First, I certainly would have used more generic terms rather than the masculine when referring to trainers and participants. Any author finds this a very sensitive area today.

Second, the discussion of laboratory training was heavily influenced by thinking of laboratory training in the context of sensitivity training. At that time we were just beginning to emerge from the equation of laboratory training with sensitivity training. For most of us in the field, we had been totally submerged with the concepts and jargon of that movement.

Third, more time would have been spent on attempting to define more tightly just what is meant by laboratory training. It seems to me that anything is entitled to the label if it stresses learning by doing (except manual skills); discovering more insight into self; awareness of how my actions affect others; awareness of how others' actions affect me; freedom to try out other behaviors in a relatively risk-free environment. Laboratory training would also include any experimentation that encourages new approaches and relating previously unrelated items. In this context, even manual skills training could be laboratory oriented.

Fourth, in the listing of pre-training influences, I would now add three additional ones I have found critical. These are:

- The sponsor's expectations and goals. (Note: the sponsor is often different from the client, though it can be the same. A sponsor is simply the person or group whose paying the bill.)

- National and international events and crises or periods of calm at the

moment. Boycotting the Olympics and resulting national feelings do affect many training events.

- The current financial status of the client and sponsor — and how they perceive training as contributing toward their regaining solvency if in financial trouble — or, if very solvent, seeing training as something to be presented in carnival settings and costume.

Fifth, when discussing the qualifications for a laboratory trainer, I would now add three additional ones. I am inclined to think today these are the most critical of all qualifications:

- Be authentic — be for real. Your behavior in the training event must be consistent with your behavior outside the training arena. Almost all trainers subscribe to a set of assumptions as to how a good manager behaves and how a good organization operates. For the most part this is assumed — rarely have I seen anyone attempt to codify these assumptions. As one examines these, they often appear very idealistic and often quite removed from the world of reality. I have no quarrel with goals or idealism — but do differentiate them and don't attempt to teach people how to function in an unreal world. I no longer believe there is a single one best way to behave — almost any behavior can be authentic and impactful provided the person is "for real."

- Perhaps this is simply an elaboration of the preceding point: but, practice what you preach. I find it very difficult to listen to a doctor who smokes tell about the dangers of smoking — or a five times wed marriage counselor wanting to tell me how to have a good marriage.

- Remember that in the training event you are neither God nor an oracle. The most rarely used phrase by trainers is "I don't know." — *Leslie E. This*

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