SUPERVISORY TRAINING METHODS IN RETAILING

a study of training methods used in middle management programs in large department stores

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Business literature indicates a growing interest and reliance on training and development as a solution to current problems faced by business and industry in general. It seems apparent that the field of retailing follows this pattern of increased emphasis on training, particularly on the middle management level.

What training methods are used most frequently in these supervisory/middle management programs? Are any trends apparent in the type of methods used? What criteria are used to select training methods for this group?

NATURE OF THE STUDY

A recent study of a group of large department store organizations surveyed supervisory training practices and opinions on methods and trends. Questionnaires were sent to organizations classified as department stores in Dun and Bradstreet's *Million Dollar Directory* and listed as having 1,000 or more employees. National chains and discount stores were not included. The organizations which responded were composed of 281 store units employing a total number of 252,000 employees.

Table I

TRAINING METHODS USED IN LARGE STORES IN MIDDLE MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS (N=28)

Method	Frequency of use	
	Regularly	Sometimes
	(Percentage of respondents using)	
Interviews on performance evaluations	75.0	25.0
Discussion	71.4	25.0
Developmental assignments	64.3	28.6
Job rotation	50.0	42.9
Coaching	60.7	32.1
Conference	53.6	35.7
Understudy assignments	57.1	28.6
Lecture	67.9	14.3
Case study	32.1	42.9
Programmed instruction	32.1	42.9
University/college courses	14.3	57.1
Project training groups	10.7	60.7
Brain storming	25.0	42.9
Role playing	14.3	53.6
Committees	17.9	46.4
Demonstrations	28.6	35.7
Incident process	10.7	25.0
Readings courses	3.6	25.0
Management games	3.6	21.4
T-training	0.0	21.4
Correspondence courses	3.6	10.7
Debates	0.0	14.3
Computer-assisted instruction	3.6	7.1

NATURE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF PRESENT PROGRAMS

Middle management training programs in these organizations typically consisted of a series of courses which were repeated each year covering skills and information needed by supervisors (33.3 per cent of the organizations) or a program of basic courses given at least annually and individual programs planned for continuing development of groups and individuals (47 per cent). Program emphasis tended to be on: initial training of new supervisors rather than continuing training of experienced supervisors; training for a present job rather than training for future potential; management functions of supervision of personnel and control of day-to-day operations instead of planning skills, innovation, and handling of uncertainty.

A high percentage of respondents indicated they believed present programs in retailing to be at least moderately effective in improving supervisory performance. Specific ratings were: 30 per cent, very successful; 63 per cent moderately successful. Despite this degree of confidence there were indications that middle management development programs were not always as effective as their planners hoped they might be. Most important reasons cited for relative ineffectiveness were: trainees' belief that training is not important because supervisors fail to perform according to the principles discussed; lack of understanding of sound learning theory on the part of trainers; expectance of too much from one program or course; lack of interest and enthusiasm for program on part of supervisors being trained. Less important reasons cited for program ineffectiveness included two other factors related to training methods: failure to use the best teaching method (15 per cent believed this to be a very important reason and 44 per cent stated it was a somewhat important reason); emphasis on the use of gadgets, gimmicks, new techniques, a smooth presentation, rather than on content and understanding (30 per cent stated this was a very important point and an additional 18 per cent rated it as somewhat important).

TRAINING METHODS USED

In their supervisory training programs the large department stores studied used, at least to some extent, all of the training methods used throughout the business field in general. Table I lists the various methods used regularly and sometimes by these organizations.

While interviews on performance appraisals were used regularly by the highest percentage of stores and were the only method put to use at least sometimes by all stores, discussion groups, developmental assignments, job rotation, and coaching were used by at least 9 out of 10 of the organizations. In examining the frequency of use of relatively new methods, one notes that programmed instruction is a part of 75 per cent of the large stores' programs. Other new techniques, such as management games and T-training, are used by 25 per cent and 21 per cent respectively. Computer-assisted instruction has been tried by only 10 per cent.

TRENDS

One major trend seemed apparent in the use of various training methods. Forty per cent of the organizations stated that they were using the lecture method less. Other single organizations expressed a similar thought by indicating that they made less frequent use of "conventional teacher-class approach," "ding-dong school," and large group meetings. Conversely, two types of participative methods were reported to be used more: 30 per cent of the organizations used programmed instruction more extensively than in the past, and 20 per cent reported their use of discussion had increased. Increased utilization of conferences, group training, dialogues, problem-solving conferences, workshops, and seminars, was also noted by organizations.

Table II
IMPORTANCE OF CRITERIA IN SELECTING
TRAINING METHODS (N=29)

Criterion	Importance of criterion	
	Very imp.	Somewhat
	(Percentage of respondents rating)	
How well it relates to subject matter and group	89.6	10.3
Type of training program objectives	75.9	17.2
Trainer's familiarity with method	41.4	51.7
Effectiveness considering group and situation	79.3	10.3
Attitudes of training group	44.8	41.4
Trainer's personality	31.0	55.2
Size of group	65.5	17.2
Trainer's motivation	48.3	34.5
Cost	27.6	48.3
Time pressures and physical facilities	20.7	55.2
Company tradition and usual practice	20.7	37.9

SELECTION OF TRAINING METHODS

Selection of the appropriate training method was based on a wide variety of considerations encompassing factors inherent in the situation, the group, and the trainer.

Very important criteria to most stores in selecting training methods were: the method's relation to the subject matter and the group; its effectiveness considering the group and the situation; and the type of training program objectives. Ranking criteria according to the total percentage of stores considering the criterion as either very or somewhat important showed the following to also be relatively important considerations: the trainer's familiarity with the method; his personality; and the size of the group. Somewhat less important appeared to be considerations of cost, time, and tradition. (See Table II)

SUMMARY

The study thus indicates that retailers, to a great extent, are using the training methods typical of business in general in their supervisory development programs. Not only are they giving considerable thought to a variety of factors in the process of deciding on the method, but they may be moving in the direction of greater use of newer and more participative methods.

SUPERVISORS MOST CONCERNED WITH PAPER, PEOPLE

Wall Street managers aren't the only ones drowning in a sea of paperwork these days. According to a recent nationwide survey (total of 1100 responses) conducted by the American Management Association's *Supervisory Management* magazine, two-thirds of those supervisors responding said that half or more of their time is taken up with shuffling papers.

Though the samplings were deliberately weighted on the side of production supervisors, 63 percent of the respondents said they supervise office activities, as against 37 percent for plant activities. This suggests a strong trend toward greater administrative responsibilities for all supervisors no matter what type of activity their company is engaged in. Nearly 30 percent said they are currently taking additional educational courses.

As for the "people" problems, various communications difficulties were noted repeatedly in the comments space. Among those cited were:

- Getting subordinates to accept ideas for change.

- Maintaining better field supervision, when subordinates were scattered and infrequently seen by the supervisor.

- Improving vertical communication,

especially from supervisory levels to middle and top levels, and downward from these levels. Related to the lack of downward communication were remarks that the supervisor needed more understanding of over-all, upper-echelon management views.

Supervisors' interests in motivation also touched upper, as well as lower, levels. Many of those who wrote in remarks made these points:

- The supervisory bosses need to know more about motivating young employees to develop pride in their work, loyalty, and an interest in long-range goals.

- At the other end of the hierarchy, respondents mentioned that their own bosses need to be motivated toward more flexibility, initiative, and problem-solving approaches. (The implication here is that many upper-level managers appear to be more concerned with "playing it safe" than with positive moves to help the supervisor translate his ideas into action.) Specifically referring to their own development, respondents also indicated a need for help in setting meaningful goals and otherwise improving their performance.