

People In Organizations — A Case for Team Training

Laboratory Training Improves Relationships in Employment Office

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The use of laboratory training, generally called sensitivity or T-group training, as an approach to building more effective work groups in organizations is not new.¹ The rationale behind this approach to organizational team training is relatively straightforward:

"In most organizations, members have had long and complicated his-

tories of interpersonal relationships which have led to their present situation. Furthermore, they can anticipate long futures together. From the relative inadequacies of these relationships have sprung the present needs for prestige, the power struggles, the trickery and intrigue which tend to siphon off creative energies from the more legitimate goals of organizational identification, collaboration, problem-solving, and decision-making. It fol-

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lows that, if these energies could be refocused onto the *real* problem of organization, a substantial contribution toward the attainment of corporate health could result."²

Sensitivity or laboratory training has been applied to "family" groups (a boss and his subordinates) in a number of large organizations³ while Kuriloff and Atkins report the results of successful team-training in a relatively smaller company.⁴ Most organizations who have attempted such training appear to have directed their efforts at upper or middle level management teams. This article is an account of team training, some call it task-group therapy, at the lowest level of a large organization.

Background

Our association with the organization, a large southern utility, began because of management's concern over their current labor turnover, a depressing and costly problem. As part of our exploration of this problem, we spent a considerable amount of time in the company's employment office. Our intention was to see if the employment office personnel could help with the turnover problem by pinpointing some issues uncovered in the exit interviews and/or by improving their own selection process.

The personnel in the employment office consisted of an Employment Manager, two supervisors, and 15 subordinates. The Employment Manager was responsible for the overall operation of the office. Both supervisors, as well as the receptionist and a secretary, reported directly to him. One of the supervisors was in charge of the selection process and had eight subordinates whose primary job was to interview and test applicants. The other was in charge of recruiting and

had three subordinates. With the exception of the Employment Manager, all employees in the office were female.

What We Found

Although we hold some values about people and their potential which encourage our undertaking the kind of developmental activities described herein, our entry was made considerably easier because personnel in the office were aware that their effectiveness *on the job* was not what it should or could be. The long lines of applicants waiting to be interviewed added to the organized confusion that seemed to prevail in the office. There was no pre-screening of applicants. Each applicant was interviewed for approximately 20 minutes and then scheduled to return later in the day (or week) to take a battery of tests. Another interview was conducted after the testing and, if successful, the applicant was scheduled to see the company nurse. Those who passed the physical were then given a placement interview and told when and where to report for work.

The entire process took from four to seven working days to complete and required each applicant to make at least four trips to the employment office. Only one out of eight recruited applicants was actually hired despite the great need for people. We could not help but wonder why these gross inefficiencies, which were so obvious to us, were allowed to exist. We decided to talk with the employment office staff.

The initial focus of our interviews was to be around the company turnover problem. We found, however, that everyone preferred to talk about the problems in the employment office. Emotions were very close to the surface and office conflicts were clearly evident. The general feeling was sum-

marized by one of the girls who said: "I can't take any more of the rigid rules and regulations, the constant pressure, and the snooping that goes on around here . . . I'd like to be treated like a human being for a change."

After the rather intensive and cathartic interviews, we reviewed and digested our notes. Most of the data seemed to point to the "climate" in the office and the ways in which this affected getting the job done. Interviewers, for example, were not allowed to discuss applicants with one another because the supervisor felt there might be a breach of confidence if personal information was shared. This not only tended to isolate the interviewers but hindered their training and development as well. In the words of one interviewer: "We need the contact with each other. How can we be expected to get our job done to get help from one another, if we're not allowed to talk to each other?" Some of the others focused more directly on the separateness they felt toward their co-workers . . . "Most of the time I feel isolated and separate from everyone else in this office. It's as though we're working in different worlds."

Several other climate dimensions seemed to reflect the ways in which interpersonal relationships can block organizational effectiveness. We categorized them as follows:

Mistrust

All respondents made some reference about the degree of trust they experienced in the office. Some of the comments concerned one of the supervisors who ". . . wants to see everything I do. I suppose she's afraid we'll do something wrong which will reflect on her. She just doesn't trust any of us." Another respondent talked about how "dangerous" it was to be

honest and open in dealing with people in the office. When asked why, she simply replied, "I just can't take the chance. One can't afford to make a mistake around here." Another girl was concerned about some of her co-workers: "Miss (X) talks about us to the supervisor and sometimes to the other girls. I'm sure she doesn't trust us and I don't trust her."

Lack of Initiating Behavior

Many of the respondents indicated a lack of motivation to be innovative in their job. They spoke of the "lack of incentive in this office" and the fact that "there aren't many new ideas that come up for consideration." One of them talked about the need for an environment ". . . that keeps people hopped up. We ought to be generating ideas about how to do our job better, but somehow we don't." When asked why there was no motivation to develop better ways to do the job, another respondent replied: "We just don't seem to care about stimulating one another to think of new and better ways to get the job done."

High Degree of Control

Many of the comments during the interviews seemed to center around conformity and control. There was talk about the ". . . many rigid rules and regulations, which don't produce the best job anyway" and the fact that there is ". . . so much emphasis on meeting objectives that I often feel more like a robot than a human being." One of the respondents spoke of her reluctance to initiate new ideas because ". . . what's the sense of it. I'm sure I won't get permission to carry them out in the first place." The impact of this excessive rigidity and conformity was succinctly put by one of the girls who commented that the office "should be run like a business

instead of an elementary school."

What We Did

After reviewing our interview material, we felt reasonably certain that interpersonal relationships in the employment office were deteriorating. Several of the dimensions outlined above seemed to fit Argyris' model of the relationship between deteriorating interpersonal relationships and organizational effectiveness.⁵ We discussed our findings with the Employment Manager and, together, decided to use laboratory training as an approach to improve interpersonal relationships and to create a climate more conducive to initiating improvements on the job.

Our next step was to meet with the total employment group and to feed back to them our impressions of the interview data, our observations of the office, and our analysis of how the group appeared to be functioning. We had two objectives in mind: (1) to encourage reactions to the data and (2) to plan, as a group, what we might do about dealing with the issues uncovered. Although the group was somewhat dismayed by the data we presented, there was a high level of motivation to do something about it.

The plan we arrived at was to begin with weekly meetings of approximately four hours in duration, with the two groups initially meeting separately. The first group consisted of the selection supervisor and her subordinates. The second group included the recruiting supervisor and her recruiters. The meetings were scheduled at different times so that the Employment Manager and the trainers could meet with both groups. Later, we planned to meet as a total group. These weekly sessions lasted for four months with some additional meetings included as needed.

To illustrate the character of these sessions and the nature of the group's development, following is a capsule description of some of the meetings:

First Session: "Doesn't anyone else care?"

There appeared to be a good deal of anxiety and nervousness in the group. The participants, seated in a circle, clustered in small sub-groups. Barbara, Joann, and Judy, all of whom had come to the employment office less than six months ago, sat next to each other. A second sub-group included Louise, Lorraine, and Pauline. These were the "old-timers" who had worked in the office for a number of years. Jerri and Sandy, who had come to the employment office from another department, seemed to be uncommitted to any sub-group and resisted overtures from the other participants. Mary, the selection supervisor, sat tapping a pencil on the notebook on her lap and seemed generally unconcerned.

Most of the session was spent struggling with ways to express feelings toward the supervisor.

"Mary", Judy said at one point. "I wish I could tell you how difficult you make it for me around here. And I know that some of the others feel the way I do, but just won't say it."

"O.K.", Mary replied, "Go ahead and say what you want to, all of you. It's your meeting."

"Well, it's *that* kind of comment and the way you look right now that makes it awfully hard for me to say how I feel," said a somewhat flushed Judy. Suddenly she cried to the rest of the group, "Where are the rest of you in this! Doesn't anyone else care about what goes on around here?"

Barbara offered some support. Hesitantly, she said, "Yes, Judy, I do feel the way you do about Mary's behavior. I just wonder if it's worth exposing myself. But I'm willing to try if it will do any good. Several others,

in a very detached way, shared some of their impressions of the supervisor's behavior.

The separateness that people talked about during the interviews seemed evident throughout the first session. Reactions to Mary's behavior seemed controlled and carefully chosen. Most of the self-disclosures, the expressions of feelings, came from the trainers. Nick, the Employment Manager, sat silently throughout the entire meeting, observing everything and revealing nothing.

The Second Session: "I didn't know they felt this way."

Although there was still a good deal of reliance on the trainers, participants began to experiment more with expressing their feelings. The group continued to focus on the supervisor. In a way, the group acted much like the chronically defeated group; they were depressed "losers" engaged in placing the blame on their leader (supervisor).

With some help from the trainers, a few of the participants were able to explore their relationships with the supervisor. Much of the discussion centered around the feelings of frustration and dependency, aroused in the newer girls by what appeared to them to be Mary's persistent need to know everything and to control everyone. Barbara told of how she had cried at home the night before after being "scolded" by the supervisor earlier in the day.

"I only stopped in to ask Judy a question about the interview form," she said to her supervisor, "I was only in there a couple of minutes when you came in and chewed me out."

"Our job is to process those applicants," Mary replied, "If you have any questions, if you want to know something, you should come to me.

That's what I'm here for."

Throughout the meeting Nick remained silent. At times, particularly during some of the emotional exchanges between Mary and the younger girls, he seemed to be uncomfortable. Although Mary appeared to be composed during most of these exchanges, she was visibly shaken at the end of the session.

"I didn't know they felt this way," she said to one of the trainers, "I didn't know I was such a terrible supervisor."

Fifth Session: "Things are really different around here."

The positive expressions which characterized the previous meetings continued with some increase in intensity. There was a growing sense of group unity and morale seemed to be at a high point. There had been a very high work load the past week and the group talked about how everyone "rolled up their sleeves" and really pitched in to get the job done.

Most of the session was spent with people sharing their feelings about how they were now experiencing their new "authentic" relationships.

"I can't believe how different things are around here," said Jerri. "I wonder when we'll get back to the real world?"

Several of the girls commented about the change in Mary's behavior over the past few weeks and the fact that they "never felt this close" to her before.

"We like you better this way, Mary," said Judy, "It seems as though we're a family now."

"I don't really feel different," replied Mary, "I don't think I'm acting any differently now than I did before."

An air of disbelief about the changes in their interpersonal relationships and the climate in the office seemed to characterize this session. Nick's behavior during the last few meetings

began to change somewhat. His silent periods were less lengthy and his participation seemed to be less distant and more involved. Mary was elated. "I really am very proud of my girls," she said at the end of the session, "this group really clicked this week."

Seventh Session: "I just can't tell him."

Although the Employment Manager was not yet a full-fledged member, during this session he became a vital part of the group. It began with Nick's disclosure about a strain he felt in his relationship with one of the girls.

"You know, Joann," he began, "up until now I haven't been able to bring myself to tell you about the kind of tension I feel between us, and one that I'm not happy with. I wish we could talk about it." Joann seemed startled but she quickly acknowledged that she too was uncomfortable with him. She recounted an incident which occurred when Nick first took over as Employment Manager. He had inadvertently made several remarks to Joann which had a tremendous impact on her, but which she had not been able to discuss with him.

Even now it was visibly uncomfortable for her to discuss it with him. Some of the girls tried to get her to explore the feelings and to share them with Nick. Tears came to her eyes and she fidgeted in her chair.

"I can't tell him," she cried softly, "I just can't tell him."

With a good deal of support from the group, Joann was finally able to tell Nick about how his remarks to her had made her feel. She talked about how "doing a good job" made her feel worthwhile and how she heard Nick's comments as being derogatory to her competence and ability to do that job. It wasn't difficult to see why the incident had deep-seated emotional implications for her. She was very

much involved with her work; the job was important and vital to her; she had always felt that she had done exceedingly well. Nick had tarnished this and threatened her by his comments. Consequently, she had harbored a good deal of hostility toward him which she was unable to express, but which was manifested in her behavior toward Nick. Joann, crying, was nevertheless able to muster enough courage to express her anger and to share with Nick the hurt she felt by his remarks.

Nick was somewhat shaken by the realization that his comments could have that much of an impact on her. Indicating that he hoped the tension between them would dissipate, he responded to Joann's confrontation with support and understanding. He expressed a good deal of positive feeling he had for her, the way she went about her work, and her commitment to what they were trying to do in the employment office.

This session was very meaningful not only for Nick and Joann, but for the others in the group. They found they were able to help both Nick and Joann to uncover and express their feelings about one another. They also learned how to deal with conflict in their group; when interpersonal conflicts exist in "our group it affects us all and we are all responsible to try to do something about it."

Eighth Session: "It takes all week to clear them out."

As indicated earlier, the recruiters and interviewers were to meet as separate groups with the Employment Manager and the two trainers. Up to now, the recruiters had had some six sessions comparable to those which we have described for the interviewers. Everyone now felt ready to integrate the two groups into a total working team.

In this first meeting the separateness

of the two groups was evident. The interviewers seated themselves on one side of the room and the recruiters on the other. Each group blamed the other for the schism that existed in the office. The interviewers accused the recruiters of creating excessive work loads for them.

At one point Lorraine said: "You run those big ads in the Sunday newspaper, then sit back and laugh at us when we get swamped with people on Monday morning. It takes all week to clear them out."

"All you need to do, Honey," replied one of the recruiters, "is to come and ask us for some help. You seem to forget that most of us were interviewers before we got into recruiting. I've been over to help out several times and never got so much as a thank you from anyone. Why should we go out of our way to help when it's not appreciated?"

"That's not true, Louise," Judy said shaking her head, "I've asked you for help a few times and you did help out. But you made me feel like you were one up on me, like you were better than me, so why bother."

Louise became angry. "Oh, hell," she blurted, "you girls have got to accept that we've had more training than you. It doesn't mean we're better than you—we're just better trained."

This was one of the key issues which separated the two groups. All of the recruiters had developed the skills required to test and interview applicants. Unfortunately, the interviewers did not possess, nor were they being trained to develop, the skills required for recruiting. In a sense this created a status differential between the two groups which became evident in their working relationships. Most of this session and the next meeting was spent working on the inter-group conflict which kept them apart.

Tenth Session: "People don't talk about their good points."

Once the inter-group conflict was resolved, a more positive approach emerged. The group participated in an exercise called "strength cultivation," which we have found useful in helping people gain a sense of their strengths, abilities, and potentialities.⁶

Initially, there was some difficulty in getting into the exercise. "It seems somewhat out of context," one person said. "People usually don't talk about their good points." Mary had volunteered to go first and shared with the group her strengths as she saw them. The group was quite enthusiastic and began by sharing the additional strengths they saw in Mary. Once the group began talking about blocks and obstacles, however, the defensiveness which had been characteristic of Mary through most of this experience seemed to manifest itself. Instead of listening and learning about herself, Mary provided rational reasons and analytical assumptions about why her behavior looked as it did to the people in the group. The effect was depressing. The group's expectations were that there would be a good deal of positivism in the exercise, but Mary seemed to dampen it much as she had done with other activities in their daily work routine. At this point, however, the girls were more capable of dealing with their supervisor. Instead of becoming despondent and withdrawn, the group continued with the exercise. After our initial description of the exercise and our involvement in the confrontation with Mary, we became relatively inactive. The group seemed to be developing its own internal leadership and was able to continue with very little direction from the "trainers."

Thirteenth Session: "We tried it before and it didn't work."

In this session the group was anxious to work on the problem of improving the selection process in the employment office. In contrast to the earlier meetings people were more willing to participate in improving their operations. Some of them talked about their feelings of commitment to the group and having "a stake in what happens around here." Initially, the group tried to get the trainers to provide the technical help required to improve the operation. The trainers, however, explained that they knew very little about the technical details of employment office activities and could help most by continuing to focus on the problem-solving process of the group.

Almost everyone participated and made some meaningful inputs into the problem. However, Mary's initial reaction was much like it was during the strength cultivation exercise. "The company is planning to make those changes next year," was her response to suggestions for improvement, or "we tried that before and it didn't work out." As indicated earlier, however, the group was more capable of dealing with her sometimes rigid and inflexible behavior which depressed them in the past. Before long she too was swept up in the problem-solving process.

Throughout this and the next session Nick encouraged suggestions from everyone. Although because of his organizational role he was quite central in the problem-solving process, he nevertheless seemed to avoid dominating or controlling the group. His own ideas and suggestions were treated much like those of any other member.

Fifteenth Session: "You'll have to see it to believe it."

The group had experimented with a variety of changes in the selection process over the past two weeks. All

applications were pre-screened; testing was conducted on a continuous basis; interviews were granted only to those who had successfully passed the tests; and physical examinations were given continuously, rather than by appointment only. Everyone was enthusiastic and elated over the new system which had been developed.

"You'll just have to see it to believe it," said Nick proudly to the trainers. "No lines; no confusion; we processed twice as many people as we usually do and could have handled a lot more." Most of this final session was spent discussing some refinements which might further improve the operation. As the members became more and more immersed in the task, the cohesiveness of the group, its spirit of cooperation, became more and more evident.

Some Conclusions

The long waiting lines at the employment office are gone. Gone too, is the organized confusion which once characterized the office. In its place is an almost casual, efficient system which quietly processes an applicant in less than three hours. As a result of some additional experimentation with selection criteria, three out of eight applicants are now hired with no apparent loss in the quality of performance on the job. It should be noted that these improvements were brought about without any changes in technology or increases in personnel.

It is our belief that, in this case at least, significant and permanent changes in the employment office would have been virtually impossible without first improving the inter-personal relationships in the work environment. While family group training does not resolve any organizational problems *per se*, it does improve the problem-solving capability of the work

group. This, as well as other experiences we have had in organizations, leads us to the following observations:

Bottoms-up Training

Most training activities of this sort usually are introduced at the top (or sometimes the middle) of the organization. This particular case, though not the only one, is an illustration of the introduction of laboratory training at the bottom of the organization. Although some sanction is necessary from the higher levels to begin a laboratory program, the process of movement upward and the degree of influence the lower levels exerted in involving their superiors was clearly evident. This was only true, however, once people in the organization began to experience themselves as influencers as well as those being influenced, as being capable of changing and improving their organizational life instead of simply being controlled by it.

Family Group Training Models

In the past we have used a number of different models in family group training which can be described as follows:

1. We have made use of a model which involves from five to six days of intensive laboratory training, on-site, and where some time of each day is devoted to organizational activities.

2. A second model we have used is one in which approximately 20 members participate in laboratory training away from the organizational setting for one week. The week is divided so that approximately 75% of the time is spent on "person-to-person" relationships and 25% of the time being spent on organizational problem-solving.

3. A third model is one in which the family group participates in two three-day segments, off-site, separated by approximately one month. The first segment is devoted to improving inter-

personal relationships, while the second involves working on organizational problems.

The model described herein represents still another approach. We met for approximately three months, on a once-a-week basis, with some additional sessions interspersed as we felt they were needed. Our general format was to first work on inter-personal and inter-group relationships followed by organizational problem-solving.

It seems to us that all these models "worked" fairly well and that they can be used as alternatives in approaching family group training. Several factors become significant in the choice of a particular model. First, is it feasible to remove a family work group from the organization's operations, and if so, for how long? Second, what are the costs of doing on-site vs. off-site training? Third, what are the effects of doing on-site family training on other parts of the organization?

Relationship Between Work Life and Home Life

We have found that home life and work life are closely related. In follow-up meetings with participants we hear over and over about the ways in which learning about inter-personal relations have made things different at home. As one person told us, "The difficulty I had with a number of people in this office turns out to be the same difficulty I had in communicating with my husband. Learning to work through it here has actually helped me to do the same at home." Another person has said, "If I knew several years ago the things I've learned here about myself and others I might have been able to save my marriage." The pattern of an individual's behavior in his organizational life bears a good deal of similarity to his pattern of behavior at home. His ways of dealing with threat, anxiety,

and frustration change very little from the home environment to the organization environment.

Team Focus vs. Individuality

One goal of "team-oriented" training is to increase one's ability to participate in group and/or organizational activities. It seems to us that very often training of this sort defies the group so that group norms exert considerable control over members. Such conditions can be as stifling to initiation and innovation as the kind of separateness and detachment we initially observed in the employment office. Greater ability in creative problem-solving seems to be related some-

how not only to genuine group membership, but to the degree of autonomous authenticity an individual is able to express and the discovery of new internal resources.⁷ Most often the process of becoming authentically autonomous requires the interdependence of other people. The degree to which one can fully enter into collaborative activities is related to the degree to which he feels he can spontaneously express his autonomy. When members of a group can do this, it almost results in increased effectiveness in inter-personal communications and an increase in group productivity.

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