

# Group Decision-Making & Problem-Solving

participation training: a human resource process

William B. Roberts

"Participation training" can be a specific decision-making, problem-solving tool for professional staffs of business or service organizations. By adapting the process recommended, it becomes a practical format or model for staff development in human-relations operations and teamwork training. This article describes the nature and character of participation training and how it can be meaningfully applied beyond a laboratory experience in human resource development.

*Participation Training for Adult Education* was conceived by Paul Bergevin and John McKinley in 1965.<sup>1</sup> It is a model for small-group discussion. Through this model, participants learn to work as a team. They focus on meeting the

educational needs of members, making decisions together and working through problem-solving experiences together while examining their process. More specifically, members of a participation training group plan and take part in a series of small-group discussions. The topics for the discussions come from the expressed educational problems, needs, and interests of the group. Through experience, group members learn educational skills and concepts such as: focusing of topics, goal setting, interpersonal communication, evaluation, consensus, disciplined observing, leadership and discovering and meeting educational needs. Through this process, they learn what helps or hinders productive group interaction

through group discussions.

## Training Experience Criteria

Miles established criteria for such a training experience and the four major components of his criteria were: (a) skill emphasis, (b) whole-person learning, (c) guided practice, and (d) psychological safety.<sup>2</sup> Participation training fits these criteria. However, to understand it as a training experience in human resource development, it must be contrasted with other experiences in this broad category. These other experiences are popularly called sensitivity training.

The major difference between participation training and sensitivity training is the emphasis in each event. Participation training

focuses on *interpersonal* processes while sensitivity training focuses on *intrapersonal* processes. Sensitivity training is less structured and emphasizes expression of feelings and emotions. In participation training, emphasis is on verbal communication, clarity of expression, listening, helping, understanding and task achievement. The concern in participation training is with consensus about the meaning of ideas so that group discussion can proceed. In sensitivity training, one learns about him or herself in depth; but in participation training, one learns about him or herself as a member of a team involved in decision-making and problem-solving.

Gibb has described varieties of sensitivity training which are not very different from participation training.<sup>3</sup> Of the 11 different varieties of sensitivity training delineated by Gibb, participation training could be considered a type of "T grouping," or "microexperience," or "discussion." This conclusion can be made if one considers participation training and these named varieties of sensitivity training as focusing on personal and group effectiveness through group discussion and observer feedback. Gibb highlights these characteristics in T grouping, microexperience and discussions. These are also characteristics of participation training.

Gordon, in the *Adult Education Handbook*, described participation training as a variety not usually identified as human relations training.<sup>4</sup> He makes this distinction because human relations training is most often descriptive of varieties of sensitivity training. However, Gordon does indicate that to him, participation training fits the genre of human relations experiences or the less popular term group dynamics. His focus on participation training events as one vehicle for a systemwide approach in institutions demon-

strates the versatility of the training design.

While human relations programs share common characteristics, the structure of each type of training event restricts the number of learning potentials which can be actualized. Participation training provides for collaborative learning in interpersonal processes as well as collaborative learning in team decision-making and problem-solving skills.

### Participation Training Exposure

Since 1955, more than 300 participation training institutes have been conducted at Indiana University by the Bureau of Studies in Adult Education. From the history of participation training institutes, lay and professional workers involved in various adult-education settings enroll as participants to learn more effective small-group

processes for the organizations in which they are involved. Administrators, teachers and rank and file participants come to the university for this training. They represent such organizational categories as public schools, hospitals, churches, government, libraries, industry, penal institutions, the armed forces and other similar agencies or organizations.

Smith, formerly of the Bureau of Studies staff, reported four distinct opportunities for learning participation training through the University Center for Adult Education, Wayne State University and the University of Michigan.<sup>5</sup> They were:

1. the first phase of a larger course in training for administrative positions in voluntary agencies,
2. a noncredit course through the Center's continuing education

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program,

3. a staff training course for the urban training center of the Office of Economic Opportunity in Detroit,

4. training for a vanguard group of public-school teachers and administrators nurturing the idea that participation training might be introduced into the high school curriculum.

Other examples of participation training exposure from other areas of the country could be highlighted, such as the U.S. Naval management training program and the public-school system in Nashville, TN. However, this author believes the knowledge of participation training as a viable means for small-group decision-making and problem-solving deserves to be more widely used.

Participants move through a

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series of group decisions, i.e., selection of topics for a discussion, formation of goal(s) for the discussion and structuring an outline for the discussion. This procedure involves participants in a group decision-making process as well as in individual decisions to volunteer to serve as group leader, coleader / recorder or observer. The discussion itself follows and represents the problem-solving phase of participation training. Throughout this process, a "trainer" guides the participants, making inputs concerning roles, norms and necessary structural elements.

Before a topic can be selected, participants are asked to present to the group any broad topic areas representing needs or interests they may have. These are recorded on large easel pads or a chalkboard visible to the total group. From this listing, one topic area is selected by consensus and phrased by the group as (a) an educational problem, (b) in question form, and (c) not answerable by yes or no.

Following a selection and statement of a topic, one or more goals are phrased by group consensus. These goals represent what is to be accomplished by a discussion of the topic. They are:

1. expressed in terms of desired changes in participants' behavior, feelings, or understandings
2. attainable
3. specific
4. shared by the participants
5. made visible to the group in written form<sup>6</sup>

The outline represents the steps of how the discussion will proceed. It defines both the specific nature of the content of the desired discussion and the sequence of tasks to be followed.

At the end of the topic discussion, a critique initiated by the observer focuses on the process of participant interaction and stimulates evaluation in terms of how well the discussion met the tasks

and goals of the topic.

After this total process, the decision-making phase is repeated by beginning the search for a new topic with accompanying goal(s), outline and service/leadership roles. The service/leadership roles are filled by participants in the group who volunteer to serve as discussion leader, coleader/recorder for the discussion and process observer for the discussion. No one is pressured to volunteer and each participant shares in the leadership by being a responsible group member facilitating the discussion through both task and group maintenance functions.

#### Dimension of Applicability

Because participation training is a human resource development process for small-group decision-making and problem-solving, a viable application is its use as a framework for conducting staff meetings. It can answer the question posed by organizational administrators: "*How can I get my staff to work together better in making group decisions toward solving department problems?*"

In every professional or service organization which the author has observed or with which he has worked, agendas are either nonexistent or are prepared and distributed by the "boss." As the ranking member of the staff, traditionally this has been the responsibility of the boss. These agendas serve as the topic areas for discussion at staff meetings and are either unnecessary for a staff meeting or are too numerous to be covered in a single meeting.

When agenda topics are discussed, they are usually of the "tell what to do" approach; hence, do not allow for staff member input requiring consensus and opportunity to express feelings, or understandings related to each other or the problem. Hence, the often-heard phrases:

• "Why have these staff meetings at all? Nothing is ever accom-

plished.”

- “These meetings are so boring. It’s the same old thing.”

- “Why doesn’t the boss just tell us what he wants, and let it go at that?”

- “No one listens to my point of view.” “These topics never seem to relate to me or my department.”

- etc.

Participation training is a solution to the negative conditions which foster these type comments. An agenda can serve as the listing of broad topic areas contributed by staff members before the meeting or topic areas can be suggested by the staff head. In either case, the composite listing should be circulated among the staff before the meeting if possible. When the staff meeting occurs or following circulation, the handling of these topic areas can follow the process of participation training.

From broad topic areas, specific topics can be formed compliant with the triple criteria listed previously: (a) an educational problem, (b) in question form, and (c) not answerable by yes or no. Then follows the formation of goal(s) for the topic question, and an outline for the discussion. If an organization believes in mutual responsibility for sharing leadership functions toward organization decision-making and problem-solving, all staff members should have the opportunity to volunteer for the designated leadership roles for each topic discussion.

In this process, the coleader/recorder serves as a secretary for the group. The coleader’s responsibility during the discussion is to make visible to the staff the discussion developments in decision-making and problem-solving on easel paper or chalkboard. After the staff meeting, the “minutes” recorded on the easel paper or chalkboard can be typed by an office secretary, duplicated and circulated. The use of easel paper is superior to a chalkboard because

it provides more space for writing and the sheets of paper used for recording the actions of the meeting are more easily transported for an office secretary to transcribe for duplication.

During the discussion, it is each participant’s responsibility to help the recorder express exactly what is being said so that the information recorded will reflect consensus, understanding and commitment of the group. More effective and productive staff meetings can result from this total participation training process.

The author has observed the success of this application in one service organization’s staff and received reports of success in another organization. Each was advised to try this application of participation training after the staff participated in an extensive training experience.

#### It Does Work!

Those business pragmatists unfamiliar with participation training may question the application suggested here, but it does work.

What is required for success is training of all staff members involved and practice to develop process skill. This, of course, requires time, but it should not be a major deterrent. Many organization staffs are practiced to meet overtime consistently and might as well expend their time increasing their effectiveness sooner rather than later. A staff retreat or additional staff meetings to learn the process of participation training would be worth the time expended and would result in more productive decision-making and problem-solving after training.

The success of any organization depends upon goal achievement which can be reached only through human understanding, acceptance and commitment of those involved. Participation training offers one vehicle in the group-development repertoire for achieving this desirable state of affairs.

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