

Trainers or Trainees—Who Dominates?

No training style works well in every situation.

Some trainees need lots of guidance, while others need very little. The trick is determining which group you're dealing with.

By C. RICHARD TINDAL and PATRICK DOYLE

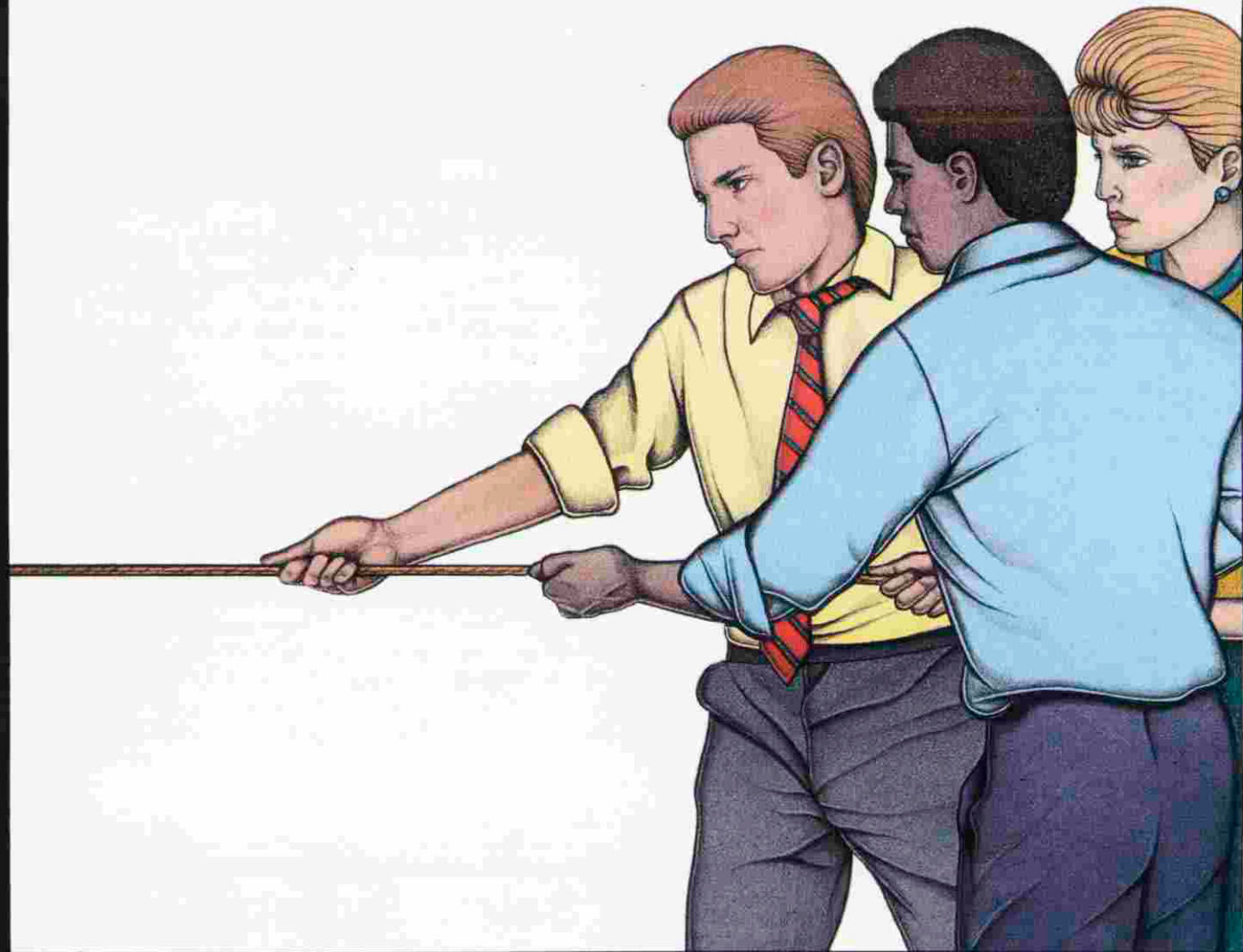
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There is no one correct training style. Inevitably approaches will vary with the individual trainers involved. At one extreme are seminars or workshops in which the trainer totally dominates, determining both the content of the sessions and the activities carried out. A trainee-dominated session in which the trainer has no input represents the other extreme.

On what basis, however, should it be determined who dominates? And how can trainers determine whether and to what extent they should relinquish or assert control in a particular training session? Answering these questions can provide an important set of guidelines for determining how trainers should approach their training.

Eleven factors need to be considered when assessing the extent to which a training activity should be dominated by the trainers or the trainees. These factors include maturity level, motivation, the level of the material, its nature, activity orientation, the trainer's repertoire, resources, the physical environment, focus, time, and goals.

The number of factors affecting the Training and Development Journal, May 1987



Sharon Cohen

training situation militate against any one training style. Therefore trainers must be flexible and adaptable. They must be sensitive to the nature of the trainees and to the context in which the training takes place. We advocate what might be termed "situational facilitating"—a parallel to situational leadership.

Examining each of the factors that affect trainer or trainee domination will illustrate how situational facilitating can work.

Maturity level of the participants

Maturity, for our purposes, does not refer to age but to a variety of other considerations. Maturity and its counterpart, immaturity, come down to degrees of distinction. We highlight three: independent-dependent, active-passive, and ability to behave in many ways-few ways.

■ *Independent-dependent*—We measure this factor on the basis of a trainee's ability to discipline himself to focus on the learning goals and activities. A colleague of ours, for example, undertook a training activity with a group that did not exhibit indepen-

dent behavior. He attempted to use structured experiences but found that many of the participants did not remain focused on the task when he was not present during their discussions. His solution was to deemphasize structured experiences and direct his attention to a lecture format.

We encountered the same trainees in other sessions. It was true that they did not function well in a situation which required independent behavior. Because of the value which we attach to structured experiences, however, our response was rather different. We continued these structured experiences, but under close supervision. We opted to institute more trainer control and domination until the participants saw the value of the activities in question and their contribution to the overall training objectives. As the more independent behavior emerged, we decreased our dominating role and gradually encouraged greater dominance by the trainees.

■ *Active-passive*—Trainees' passivity can arise from many sources. It can stem from an attitudinal hang-up—a situation in which a certain trainee insinuates, "I'm here, now lay it on me!" Faced with this

type of passive behavior, the trainer can attempt two rather contrasting approaches. With the first approach, the trainer expresses his or her gratitude for the trainees' presence and emphasizes the importance of each member's contributions. This approach can undermine the "me-versus-you" dichotomy that results from the passive attitude being exhibited.

The second response is more confrontational and, if mishandled, it can adversely affect the other trainees. Faced with the negative viewpoint expressed above, we have occasionally told the individual involved that there must be a misunderstanding since we have no intention of "laying" anything on him or her; that we would never accept such an assignment. Often this type of exchange clears the air. The trainee satisfies his or her anger or frustrations by sending out the message and provoking a reaction. If the issue has not been resolved, the trainer may have to probe further and more aggressively to find a way of diffusing the situation.

Trainee passivity can also stem from respect and deference for the trainer's knowledge and experience. This type of attitude reflects the transactional analysis

life state which says, "I'm not okay, you're okay." The trainer should attempt to emphasize the value of individual experience. In this situation, the seminar or workshop activities will be trainer dominated; he or she will have to draw out individuals within the group and emphasize the positive contribution each participant can make.

A third, and particularly common, cause of passive behavior is that generated by an individual's fear of exposing vulnerabilities to a group. The trainer should dominate such a session until a pattern of positive reinforcement has been established by the group and the individual's fear of criticism has been eliminated or severely reduced.

We teach one technique that provides this positive reinforcement in a particularly effective manner. We instruct facilitators to conduct a session while strictly adhering to two rules: they cannot tell participants that opinions they express are wrong, and they cannot use the word *no* except in an illustrative context.

Following these rules for the first time is more difficult and frustrating than one might expect. In our experience, however,

trainers who master the ability to achieve a training objective without resorting to these two negatives find the efforts very rewarding.

■ *Behaving in many ways-few ways*—Our concern here is with the trainees' behavioral flexibility. We have found, for example, that the prospect of training session role-playing activities threatens some people a great deal. A trainer who uses role playing without dealing with apprehensions will find that the associated stress detracts from the training objectives. If, with the trainer's help, participants gain confidence and feel at ease with one another, they don't mind as much the prospect of exhibiting their acting ability—or its lack.

Similarly the trainer must be sensitive to whether or not participants appear able to function effectively in groups. Some members may elect to withdraw and just observe their group. Through monitoring and intervening the trainer can involve such individuals more actively in the training session.

In both of the above examples the sug-

gestions for a trainer-dominated session stemmed from the inability of participants to exhibit the varied behavior patterns required.

Motivation of the participants

The extent of motivation seminar participants feel can vary considerably. We have all seen individuals who attend a seminar because the organization requires it. These people often delight in making everyone in the room aware that they are present under duress. They also usually make it clear that they regard the seminar as a waste of their time. They appear determined not to learn anything.

These types of individuals, whose only motivations are extrinsic and imposed, we label "mules." Sometimes trainers can bring such people into the seminar activity by finding topics for which their expertise can be utilized. It may be, however, that the only way to deal with mules is through discreet requests, at coffee break perhaps, that they work out their problems with their bosses back at the office instead of

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inflicting their dissatisfactions on the rest of the seminar participants. The trainer has the responsibility to be as forceful as necessary to ensure a proper learning environment for all participants.

Some external motivational influences are less negative or potentially disruptive. There are people, for example, who will attend seminars because they believe their presence will impress their bosses and enhance their career plans. Others may attend primarily to impress everyone with their vast experience or knowledge of the seminar topic. Some participants may attend for the social or professional contacts that seminars afford. In any of these instances, the trainer must try to understand the motivating forces and intervene appropriately.

Normally the most positive responses are found in participants whose motivation to attend is intrinsic—that is, individuals who attend out of a genuine interest in the topic and a belief that attendance will be to their personal benefit. Even in these instances the trainer may face problems if the seminar does not live up to advance billing or does not meet expectations. This difficulty should not arise, however, if the trainer has prepared the initial groundwork properly.

Level of material

The ability of the trainees to handle the level of difficulty of the subject matter involved influences the trainer's role. Two types of difficulty may arise.

The first possible difficulty concerns manual skills. A training session may impose physical demands the participants cannot meet. We encountered a rather striking example of this situation when involved in a program to train wiring specialists for the telephone industry. Some participants were unable to proceed past the very basic step of selecting the appropriate wire to solder. The problem, we quickly discovered, was that while all the steps in wiring telephone mainframes rely on color coding, some of the individuals in the training program were color-blind.

The second, and in many respects more complex, difficulty arises when individuals lack the cognitive abilities required to meet the objectives of a particular training program. Conceptualizing, thinking in the abstract, postulating possible future courses of action or response: these activities may cause considerable difficulty for some participants, at least initially.

Where participants lack manual skills, cognitive abilities, or both, trainers need to intervene and direct more forcefully.

Nature of material

Just as the level of the material may call for greater or lesser trainer dominance, the nature of the material can have considerable influence. The technological orientation of the training is especially significant.

In training sessions on the impact of automation and the office of the future, we have seen many examples of cyberphobia:

fear of the computer and all that it represents. In a number of these sessions we have worked with managers who would be classified as mature in terms of the preceding discussions, and who clearly had the cognitive ability to handle the level of material being presented. While these factors should call for a trainee-dominated session, in fact we found it necessary to retain control of the session. We had to contend with managers who experienced

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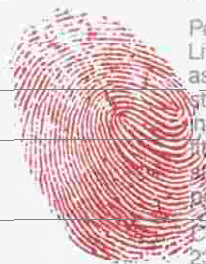
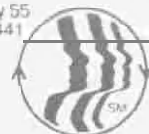
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great anxiety because of the nature of the training and felt threatened by the hands-on activity built into the seminars. As we succeeded in demystifying the topic, we reduced our direct intervention accordingly.

Activity orientation

A key consideration is the extent to which training is task oriented or process oriented. Task-oriented training and development focuses on specific changes that are to occur: acquiring a new skill like keyboarding or developing a new leadership style or technique.

Process-oriented training concerns specific change too, but it also emphasizes the way in which that change affects the

such approaches as small group discussions and case studies, trainers may find it necessary to maintain a dominant role if the participants are immature.

We encourage trainers to introduce a variety of techniques and approaches so that they can expand their repertoire. New approaches must be carefully planned and monitored. The trainer must be sensitive to whether or not the participants are capable of handling the new approach. Those able to behave in a few ways may not respond to role plays or other very participative activities.

Trainers can suffer from the same limitations. However desirable it may be to reduce one's reliance on the lecture method, trainers need different skills and

and couldn't purchase any more until the new budget year! They reasoned, logically enough, that if they didn't let anyone use the projector, the last lonely bulb might make it through the fiscal year. Fortunately we always carry a spare bulb and, assured of this backup, the maintenance staff reluctantly released their projector. Sure enough, their bulb burned out midway through our seminar, and we departed that city the next day without our bulb.

Physical environment of training

The actual physical setting of the training can strongly influence the approach the trainer uses. A room that is stuffy or very warm will generally lull people to sleep, especially if the trainer lectures most of the time. A too-small room may prevent the separation needed for group work, while a room that is too large may cause groups to feel psychological detachment from the facilitator and from each other.

Unless trainers have the luxury of choosing the exact physical environment, they can only examine the setting well in advance, note any potentially beneficial or harmful features, and adopt strategies that maximize the setting's strengths and overcome its drawbacks. Trainers who build entire sessions around small group discussions, for example, may have to make major adjustments if an area cannot accommodate their plans. Using one or more additional rooms nearby may provide the answer if sufficient lead time permits such arrangements.

We have frequently trained in one particular room which is a facilitator's heaven except for one factor: it is situated next to the conference center's kitchen. When the smell of food begins to drift into the room about 11:30 each morning, a mysterious sense of urgency takes hold of the participants, and they begin to focus on a new objective!

Focus of training

Training focus refers to the time perspective in which the results of the training are expected to materialize. For training with a short-term perspective, the trainer should dominate. Retail organizations provide a good example. They constantly train new staff in procedures and informational requirements for such items as sales slips and return slips. This sort of training obviously involves basic cognitive and physical skills, and the results of the training are expected to be applied in the workplace almost immediately.

The trainer must be sensitive to whether or not participants appear able to function effectively in groups

organization over time. It focuses on the interactions among those affected by changes and has a long-range organizational influence. Process orientation places more demands on the trainer since it requires understanding the training activities' environment. In our view such training activities should be dominated by the trainees, while those with a task orientation should involve the trainer in a more dominant role.

Many argue that all training should have the broader process orientation. Realistically, however, very little training falls into this category. Training is often undertaken with little or no research. Organizations may institute programs simply because they "want to do something" in the area of professional development. Too often the result is traveling road show seminars that entertain but offer limited relevance to the organization's real needs.

Trainer repertoire

The trainer's repertoire of techniques inevitably influences the extent of trainer domination. If a trainer relies almost exclusively on lectures—not an approach we would recommend—there is little room for trainee involvement, much less trainee domination. Role plays, case studies, and small group discussions normally lend themselves to much greater trainee involvement. No one factor can be considered in isolation, however. Even with

behaviors to introduce guided discussions, case studies, in-basket exercises, or other audience-involving variations.

Availability of resources

Scarce resources can dictate a particular approach to training and development. Trainers may find, for example, that they must supply all the expertise for a particular topic because the organization lacks the funds to hire outside specialists. This constraint may strongly influence the training session design and the extent of trainer-trainee domination.

Interestingly two quite contrasting results may occur. Some trainers, feeling insecure about their lack of expertise in some of the topic areas, may dominate totally, discouraging any participation that might lead to awkward questions. Others in this situation shift the focus to participative discussions, opting to build on the expertise in the audience rather than going it alone. Either approach may be ineffective if limited resources are the only justification. Generally, however, we would expect a trainer to exercise fairly tight control over a session when faced with limited resources.

Another constraint trainers may experience is lack of equipment normally taken for granted. One of our training sessions began on an awkward note when the maintenance staff of the organization involved expressed an unwillingness to let us use the overhead projector. They explained that they had only one bulb left

Training with a long-term focus or perspective will normally involve greater trainee participation and dominance. One retail enterprise hoping to focus managers' attention on the organization's future provided a striking example. They expected no immediate results from the training session being planned; rather, they expected that a new framework for action would evolve gradually from the impetus of the training activities.

Managers were told to be on standby during a specific two-day period for a special developmental seminar. They were contacted at an early morning hour, picked up by taxis, and taken to a planetarium in the city. Seated in a theatre facing a model of the solar system, they were given one question to answer. "Ladies and Gentlemen, for the sake of survival, humanity has begun to establish homelands on other planets. You are on a spaceship destined to travel to one of these planets as our representatives. *Describe our organization as it should be to survive under these conditions.*"

The ideas generated by the participants about their organization's future then dominated the seminar.

Time available for training

The adequacy of the time available for training is related to the desired outcome of that training. For example, the extent to which trainees have to internalize information or master a new skill will have at least as much affect on time requirements as the quantity of training material.

Information can be transferred very rapidly using the lecture method, but with this approach the participants usually internalize the information in an unsatisfactory way. On the other hand, experiential approaches usually lead to greater internalization, but they are more time consuming than lectures or self-study methods.

These considerations dictate training approaches that incorporate greater trainer or trainee domination. It is important, therefore, to appreciate their implications so that the actual domination pattern corresponds to the pattern desired.

Goals of training

When the goals of a training activity are ambiguous, a trainer-dominated session is almost unavoidable. The trainer finds himself attempting to provide the focus and structure which should flow naturally from clear overall objectives. In these circumstances participants may have difficul-

ty dealing with the ambiguities involved—and so may some facilitators.

Clear training goals or objectives do more than allow greater initiative by the trainees. Measurable objectives provide a basis for following through and evaluating the training and its impact on the organization. Unclear objectives may not prevent effective training from occurring, but they do make it almost impossible to determine what has been accomplished.

The training style dichotomy

In any particular training session, the appropriate extent of domination by the trainer and the trainees is a function of the 11 variables discussed above. We already have seen that these variables may work at cross-purposes. Thus trainers must carefully consider the variables' impact and the implications for trainers' roles. By so doing they can design the approach that will be most effective for the particular situation.

In an attempt to simplify these considerations, we can organize these variables into three sets of dichotomies focused around the trainee, the training activities, and the trainer.

■ *Trainee-based dichotomies*—The maturity level of the trainee and the source and nature of the motivation of the trainee give rise to dichotomies illustrated in Figure 1.

At Point A the trainee combines a low level of maturity with strong, intrinsic motivation. These factors combined in a manager result in "the enthusiastic incompetent." Trainees who combine these traits are equally a concern.

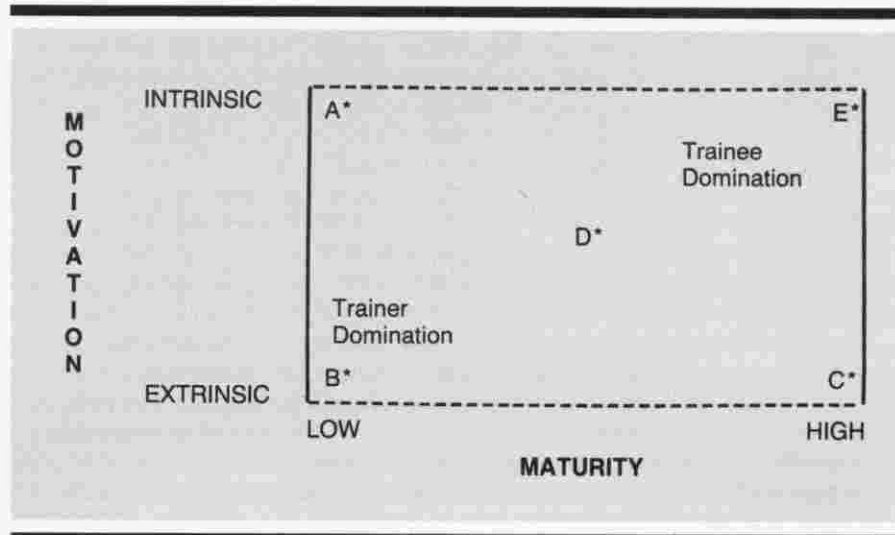
We encountered one group of trainees, for example, who were highly motivated because they could see the significance of the topic not only to their working environment but also to their personal lives. Yet several of these trainees were immature; they could not cope with the ambiguities inherent in the case method being used during the training session.

Their immaturity reflected itself in behavior such as continued attacks on the case studies. They said the studies provided insufficient information—but the studies all do, or should, since real-life decisions must also be made with incomplete information most of the time. They thought the cases failed to relate to their field—but cases seldom do, and most people can benefit by looking beyond their particular discipline. They also found that they could not clearly identify the innocent or guilty among the cast of characters—which really meant that the case was well written.

The trainer in this instance dominated the session by establishing the rules under which the discussions were to take place, but capitalized on the intrinsic motivation of the trainees by permitting the degree of freedom offered by the group discussion method used with case studies.

At Point B the trainee exhibits low maturity and is motivated only extrinsically: "I'm here because the boss sent me, and I am not happy about it." In this situation the trainer will dominate almost totally. If he or she still uses case studies, for example, the trainer will define the focus and spell out the process to be followed. The trainees may be given a detailed list of

Figure 1—Trainee-based dichotomies



questions to be answered in relation to the case material. In the ensuing discussion of the case, the trainer should attempt to diminish the source of the dichotomy.

Point C represents trainees who are still only motivated extrinsically, but who are a great deal more mature. This combination is often found in middle managers who have been directed by the CEO to attend a session covering the latest management bandwagon and who believe that their time could be more effectively spent back in their offices. Faced with such individuals, the trainer may have to assert his role. Once the relevance of the training has been demonstrated, however, one can usually rely on the maturity of the participants to carry them through toward the fulfillment of the training objectives.

At Point D the trainer can plan a mixture of activities that will incorporate alternative approaches and behaviors. The trainees in this instance exhibit a moderate degree of both maturity and intrinsic motivation. The trainer still will be involved actively in scheduling the activities to ensure a steady progression through the training material.

Point E is the situation in which the trainer can function as a pure facilitator. Faced with trainees who are mature and intrinsically motivated, the trainer can act more as a resource person to be called upon as necessary. While he or she might suggest the initial outline of the training session and activities, the trainer's suggestions would be subject to the approval of the participants. Trainer-facilitators should attempt to limit their roles to providing a context in which the participants can share their insights and learn from each other.

■ *Activity-based dichotomies*—A number of dichotomies can arise in connection with the nature of training activities. Relevant factors include the level of material (introductory, intermediate, advanced); nature of the material (generalized or specific); timing, focus, and goals of the workshop; and resources and environment. Figure 2 represents the two factors we have chosen to examine as dichotomies: the time focus of training and the training goals.

The difficulty with this dichotomy is establishing what is a clear goal and to whom this goal must be clear. We recall a retail organization which had what it believed to be a clearly defined goal and a very short-term perspective. The training in question concerned high school and college students who were to become members of that organization's part-time staff contingent. The goal of the training

was ostensibly to train the students to complete accurately the various forms they would be using on the job—sales forms, return forms, timesheets, and the like. The time frame was brief, partly because of the widespread attitude in retail organizations that any time spent in training is time away from the sales floor.

While the training goal may have appeared clear, the students did not understand the impact in wasted time and effort which would result from each of their errors—errors the financial side of the organization would have to correct. This related problem pointed to the real goal of the training activity: to minimize this wasteful demand on others in the organization by reducing the errors made when completing the various forms.

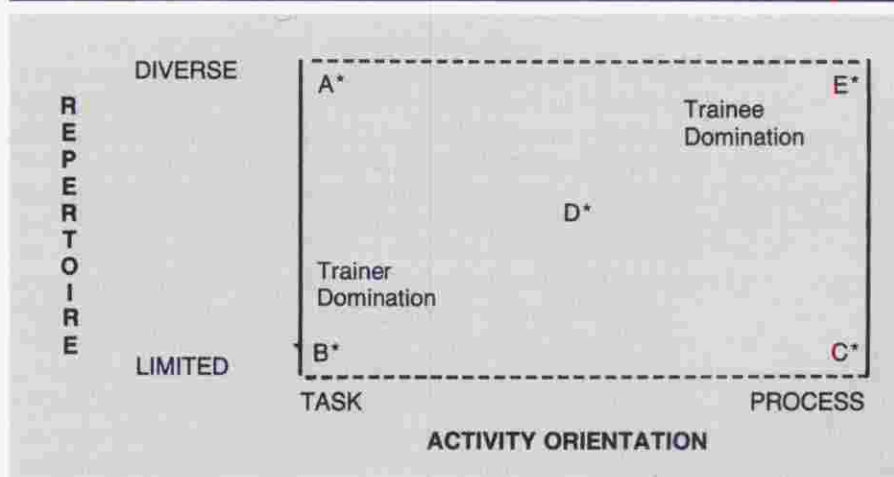
Without sufficient time to explain to the trainees the impact of their mistakes as they spread through the organization, the retailers took a very directive approach to training. The motivation for the training was supplied in a "Theory X" manner. "Do it this way, and do it right. We will be tracking your number of errors, and if there are too many you will be terminated." This trainer-dominated approach is found at Point B in Figure 2.

In contrast we were involved in another situation in which the goals of the undertaking were clarified to the satisfaction of the participants and the time perspective was sufficiently long to allow the use of entirely different training approaches. An educational institution had decided to implement a faculty evaluation system that

Figure 2—Activity-based dichotomies



Figure 3—Trainer-based dichotomies



relied upon input from many sources including students. The president of the institution believed that such an initiative would only succeed if the faculty were heavily involved in the design of the evaluation system.

Although reluctant at first, faculty members agreed to undertake the project if they were given sufficient time and training in the area of performance analysis and evaluation. Over the next two years, the trainers working with the faculty played a very limited role which mainly involved locating the resources and the training materials that the faculty committee felt it needed. In other words this longer-term, clearly defined training activity was entirely dominated by the participants, as represented by Point E of Figure 2.

The trainer may also face other dichotomous situations such as when ample training time is available but the goals are difficult to clarify (Point A), or where the goals can be clearly identified but the time is limited (Point C). This latter situation is often encountered in the training of executives who have many competing demands on their time. Point D represents a middle-ground situation in which goals are somewhat clear and the time focus is adequate if not ample.

■ **Trainer-based dichotomies**—Figure 3 illustrates dichotomies that arise in connection with the repertoire of the trainer and the orientation (task or process) of the training activity.

At Point B trainer domination is total. The trainer's very limited repertoire reflects itself in a lecture method of training, leaving little opportunity for trainee involvement. In addition, the task focus of the training—the emphasis on acquiring some specific skill—also leads to trainer domination.

A trainer at Point A has a diversified repertoire even though still faced with task-oriented training. In this situation he or she introduces alternative techniques and approaches while still imposing considerable direction and control.

Point C represents an unfortunate combination. In this situation we face training concerned more with process than specific tasks. Such training should build on extensive input from the trainees, but the trainer's limited repertoire makes this more difficult. Even if the participants are willing to play a much more active role, the trainer may have difficulty accommodating this type of behavior.

At Point E we have conditions which produce a trainee-dominated session. The orientation of training is on process and

the trainer has the varied repertoire which will allow and encourage maximum involvement of the trainees. In this situation the trainer essentially will support the trainees as they explore the concepts under study.

Finally Point D represents the middle-ground position where the trainer has some flexibility in his repertoire and the orientation of training is partly task and partly process. The result is a session with both trainer direction and a significant degree of trainee involvement.

Fit your training style to the situation

You don't have to agree with the specific details of the dichotomies outlined above. They will have achieved their purpose if they prompt you to think more carefully about the variables that should influence your approach to training.

Our basic point is that by showing greater sensitivity to these variables, trainers will have a solid basis for deciding to what extent they should exert or relinquish control in any particular training situation. By being able to decide in advance on your best approach, you are always in control of the situation—even when you have deliberately relinquished control.



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