

they might have learned, they see their bosses as obstructive and they are known to leave the enterprise even after five or more years of service within it.

The basis of learning

What, then, do we do about all this? Let us first try to define the need more precisely. We must convert our enterprises, our factories, our hospitals and even, it is argued, our universities into institutions in which we can learn from our everyday experience. Not only the workman but also his manager needs to learn: doctor and nurse, professor and student, all must promote a social process that enables their organizations to adjust to the outside changes that have picked them all up by the scruff of the neck.

What, then, is this social process? What is the nature of learning? Even older managers who no longer knowingly set out to learn anything, find themselves, from time to time, in situations in which they need advice. What is accepting advice if it is not learning? And in what conditions does anyone accept advice? Let us look at them very carefully.

First: you must recognize your need. Nothing is so infuriating as advice that you do not want—even though the man offering it may think otherwise. A man will no more accept advice that he does not feel himself to need than he will submit to a major surgical operation that his doctors tell him is unnecessary. Learning, like accepting advice, is possible only if a person wants to learn. No man can learn to give up alcohol unless he wants to. Hence our first need in a learning situation is motivation to learn. Things could be better than they are, we must tell ourselves; we should be willing to improve our existing capacities.

Second: which of you takes advice from a man in whom you have no confidence? In your professional task, the regulations of your enterprise may require you to seek advice only from specific quarters, but if you do not think much personally of the advisers, of what value is the advice? How much benefit can you gain from it? How much do you in fact learn if there is no respect in the relationship? Hence, our second condition in the social process of learning requires personal identification with the teacher.

Third: advice must be realistic for you in your own present difficulty. General advice, particularly when of a lofty or abstract nature, can be among the greatest of insults to a person's self-respect. So, too, can be advice excellent in conditions not quite the same as those under discussion, but that hides or suppresses a weakness fatal for the present problem. Hence, if advice is to be accepted and learning is to take place, the message must be practical. The man who is to benefit must be able to see it working or, better still, to see himself as working it. Our third condition requires a realistic specification on which to act.

Fourth: in trying out the advice, the person who has accepted it must be able to see for himself that it works. The doctor's bottle must actually relieve the pain; the new accounting system must be seen to produce the information more quickly and more accurately; one's new stroke on the golf course must demonstrate for all to see that one can now drive the ball farther and straighter. Mystical advice, the results of which must be taken on trust, or some of the slowly acting remedies of economists, whose effects are not visible for 20 years or more, are not likely to be taken up with enthusiasm. It is said that the human male will be entirely bald three centuries ahead. Which of you would next week invest your company's capital in the invention of some molecular biologist that can be proved, on the highest medical authority now existing, to produce, ten

generations into the future, beings with as much hair on them as an old English sheep dog? Not many of you, I think. No. It is essential both that the advice can be seen as practicable and that the person accepting it can observe the outcome of its practice.

Our four points become, then, both for advice and for learning:

- Motivation, or agreeing the need;
- Identification, or trusting the adviser;
- Specification, or perceiving that one can follow the advocated course of action;
- Verification, or checking that the outcome is as expected.

(Incidentally, we see now why so much so-called management training is useless; those to whom it is given do not choose it, do not think their teachers understand reality, do not see the relevance of their instruction and have no chance back home of examining the effects of using it. None of our four essential points is met.)

Courses of action

Going back to our factory staffs, our middle managers, our sales forces or whatever other collections of human beings it may be who display the symptoms of alienation, we must now ensure that they become engaged in learning activities with the fourfold structure I have just described. How do we do this? It is a great challenge to the profession of personnel management, to recognize that it is basically in the learning trade; it is a still greater challenge for the profession to devise learning processes that can be used in industrial and commercial practice.

Let me describe one such method very briefly. Our nursing studies had shown the great importance of communication, particularly in the need for junior nurses, by posing questions to their superiors, to understand the general programmes of their work and responsibilities. The confusion and uncertainty of the hospital situation was partly the cause of the juniors' inability to learn; it was also partly the result of this inability. All involved in the situation had to help to improve it; all were caught up in a potential learning situation. All, in other words, were in need of advice, from the top of the hospital to the bottom. Thus the problem was to devise learning processes that:

1. Got everybody interested (*motivation*);
2. Gave everybody confidence in their advisers (*identification*);
3. Showed everybody what they should personally do (*specification*);
4. Enabled everybody to see the effect of what they were doing (*verification*).

We did this by forming a voluntary consortium of 10 hospitals that had each recognized their internal problems of communication from the evidence of their own statistics. This guaranteed *motivation*. We used the common problems of the 10 hospitals to ensure *identification*. Each hospital was to learn from another, not from a professor or other outside teacher in whose advice no responsible hospital administrator, whether medical, nursing or lay, could repose much confidence. If one surgeon suggests to another that such-and-such a problem exists at the latter's place of work without being seen because it is too familiar to those who live with it; and if he further suggests that such-and-such a remedy might be tried, there is bound to be, on average, more identification than if the same advice comes from a person without professional qualifications or practical experience.

The kind of advice offered, or the kind of problem identified, was to be such that the persons in the

hospitals could themselves do something about it, such as to improve the organization of some supply or transport or message system; those within this system, whether surgeons or porters, matrons or cleaners, could see their personal involvement in the exercise that was to form the application of the advice. This ensured realistic *specifications* of action.

As each group worked through, in co-operation with other hospitals, its particular learning situation, the group was also able to see the effects of it by improvements of the system it had taken in hand, thereby maintaining the will to carry on with new exercises. This ensured *verification*.

Over three years the ten hospitals have tackled about 60 projects in this kind of self-analysis. We have engendered a process of social learning, of bringing the surgeons into touch with their nurses, their porters and their theatre staffs by involving them all in studying their collective problems. And we have secured this essential identification, not through outside experts telling the senior hospital staffs what was wrong and what they ought to do, but by getting ten hospitals together as professional equals, to support each other throughout what may be a long and threatening process of self understanding.

Action among the managers

A Belgian consortium, working on an inter-company basis, has come to the same conclusions as our studies in the chemical works which I referred to above, namely there is a lack of clarity about objectives, leading to complaints of constant interruption and to a discontent about wasted abilities. If top management holds these views, what possible hope is there for those on the shop-floor to feel that things are reasonably well planned or that the future is secure? But more important, what can be done about it? If top management also feels like this about its communication systems how do we improve them?

A moment's reflection will show that it is of limited use to send for consultants. What ought they to know about managers' own problems which managers themselves do not? Indeed, there is no more learning when outsiders tell top managers what to do than when men on the shop-floor make suggestions in the same conditions. Our task involves building a learning system among the top managers so that they may find out for themselves.

We are experimenting with an idea which applies the well-known principles of quality control to the outputs of the management network, for quality control represents a set of ideas that chemical engineers already accept. Our proposal is that all managers in the system—there are 65 at plant management level and above—should allow their names to go into a hat; from the 65 cards the top manager's secretary—who looks like a shipwrecked film actress—every week draws five names. She spins a coin as she does so, allocating to each name so drawn a head or a tail.

The managers who draw heads have to report, during the next week, on the incident of their managerial experience that gave them the greatest satisfaction. The men who draw the tails are to report upon the incident of their managerial experience that gave them the greatest trouble. In this lottery, all persons stand an equal chance—about one in 13—of being among the

five: nobody is being deliberately picked upon either for praise or blame; all, sooner or later, will be able to speak up.

The five so chosen by lottery meet towards the end of the week, discuss their individual incidents and decide among themselves which appears to be of the greatest interest to the 65 as a whole; this is then analysed in detail at their next weekly assembly. In estimating the interest of an incident the five are guided by their dependence upon communication; management problems generally arise because information that should have been available was not there. The working material of managers is data, reports, facts, information—and management systems fail for lack of these. Thus, the five examine each weekly incident as either the communication system breaking down, on the one hand, or surpassing itself, on the other.

To pursue the description of how each incident is analysed and judged for potential harm—or even actual harm—is rather beyond my scope. But the managers themselves having demonstrated the connection between management motivation and management communication, have assured their desires to improve communication. The notion of sampling their own successes and failures meant that there was immediate *identification*. They learn from the record of their own system, not from some external critic who did not share their operational anxieties. Since the sampled incidents probably resulted largely from failures within the network that they themselves composed and controlled, their *specifications* for action were highly realistic. As to *verification* they would know almost at once whether their own actions to remove their difficulties had been successful. Moreover, there was always the 50 per cent chance that, one's name having been drawn, would oblige one to report something unexpectedly good. And if so complex an organization as a network of 65 managers in charge of a computer-controlled chemical works can sometimes rise above itself and surprise its members by its unexpected efficiency, should they not take the trouble to find out why?

Learning, not teaching

At the beginning of this article I suggested that, until we know more about the nature and speed of learning, *L*, we shall never understand how to adjust ourselves to our present or future rates of change, *C*. I suggest that the processes of learning are symbiotic: both parties, teacher and pupil, doctor and nurse, manager and worker, have to learn from each other. We are no longer in a world where some are privileged to lecture and others are condemned to listen. Each has to help the other find out. As I reach the end of my career I see one thing clearly: that I never taught anything to anybody. I might occasionally have enabled them to learn. And this is the task now before the profession of personnel management. To discharge it effectively, they must first teach themselves what they are, precisely, trying to do.

Further reading

1. Douglas McGregor, "The Human Side of Enterprise" McGraw-Hill, 1960.
2. Rensis Likert, "New Patterns of Management", McGraw-Hill, 1961.