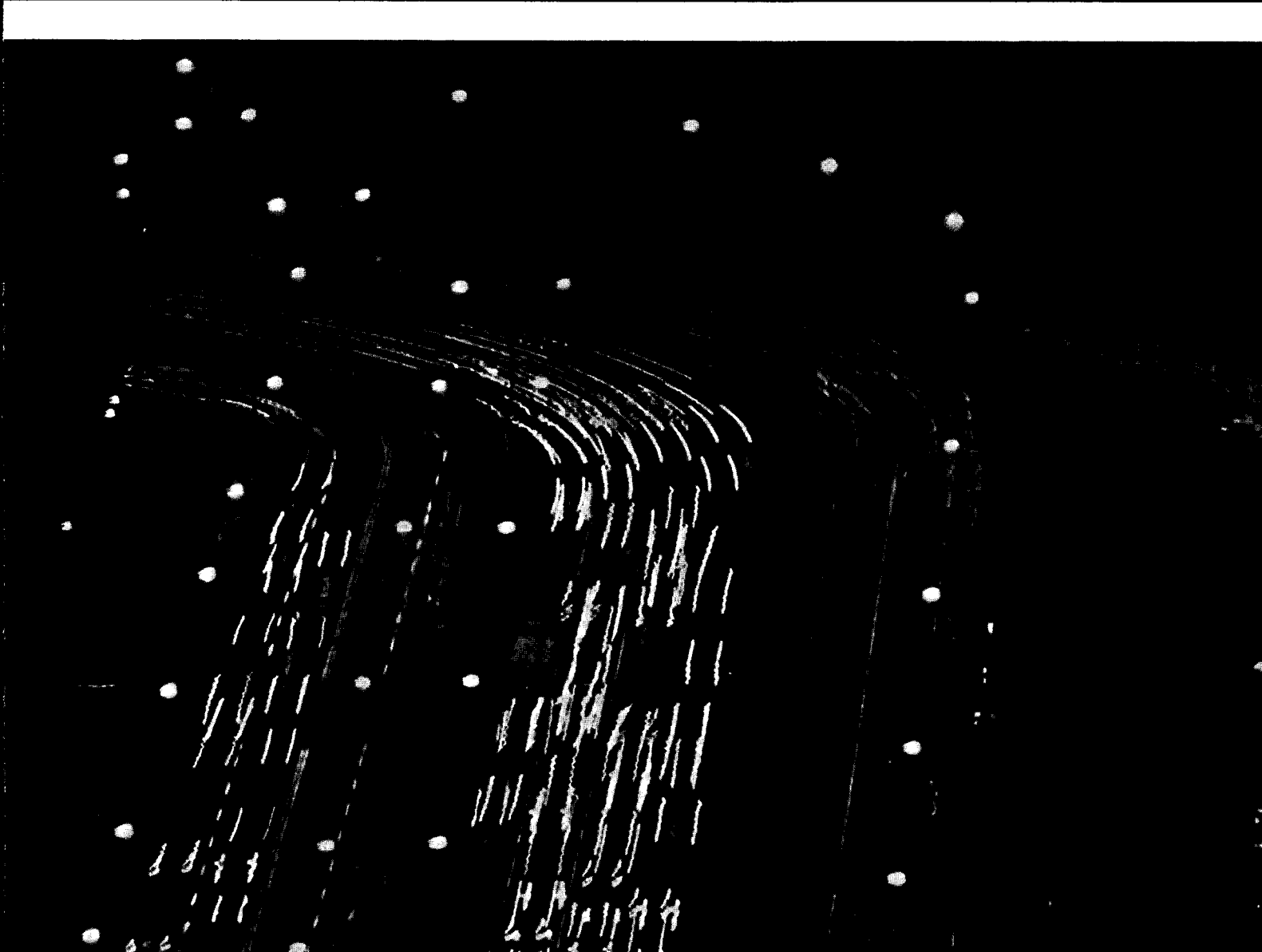


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TRAINING: sharp or dull management tool?

Problems among an organization's personnel may or may not respond to a training program. It all depends upon what is lacking among the employees: knowledge . . . or ability to execute.

by Thomas F. Gilbert, Ph.D., and Geary A. Rummler

TRAINING TOO OFTEN IS USED as a cure-all for personnel ills ranging from poor attendance to shoddy workmanship. And, as indiscriminate advocates of training have learned, it is usually expensive but not always effective.

Contrary to popular belief, workers know almost all there is to know about their jobs. Moreover, almost all workers want to do a good job.

Sound like an exaggeration? To find out, let us examine a typical performance problem:

Among their regular duties, industrial engineers at State Utilities Bureau are required to submit monthly reports elaborating on the time and money invested in each project worked on during the month.

This data is used by management as the basis for accepting or reject-

ing proposals from prospective suppliers.

Reports are poor

Theoretically, the time-and-cost reports enable the organization to accept the best proposals possible. In practice, however, the reports are not effective. In many cases, data are inaccurate. In others, reports are poorly prepared and confusing. And almost without exception, the engineers fail to turn their reports in on time. As a result, State Utilities sometime accepts badly priced proposals.

Considering the problem to be serious, the bureau's director suggested that the training department look into the possibility of some kind of training for the engineers.

The bureau director explained the problem to the training director this way:

"Pricing proposals accurately is a critical factor in getting the best services at the lowest possible cost. And we are not able to do a good job of evaluating proposals because our industrial engineers are not giv-

ing us accurate information. Isn't there some kind of training you can give them to make them better report writers?"

The training director acknowledged the importance of the problem and promised to give it top priority. His first step was to talk to the manager of industrial engineering, who was responsible for reviewing the monthly time-and-cost reports before they were sent to management.

The manager was quick to voice his displeasure with the way engineers submitted reports. "I've got 19 engineers in my department and not one of them hands in his reports on time. By the time I get them it is too late to send them back for extensive correction, so I do the best I can to patch them together to make some sense out of them."

Teaching favored

"Why do you suppose the reports are so bad?" the training director probed.

"These men are engineers, not writers. I think they just do not

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know how to work up good reports. If you could figure out a way to teach them to write good ones, I would be grateful to you."

While both the bureau director and the industrial engineering manager favored some sort of training to improve the engineers' report-writing skills, the training director was not convinced that training was the answer. To help him pinpoint the actual cause of the problem, he contracted with a training consultant who agreed to study the engineers' report-writing performance and make recommendations.

Consultant's findings

Four days later, the consultant reported his findings. They were:

- The engineers know almost all there is to know about writing good reports.
- The engineers are never told that the reports are vital for evaluating proposals. As far as they know, the reports are filed away to gather dust on a shelf.
- The engineers are required to write the reports at their drawing boards. After several hours of writing at an angle, their necks and arms become tired and stiff.
- The services of typists are not made available to the engineers; the detailed reports have to be written in long-hand.
- While they know what to write, the engineers do not know how it is expected to be written. No style manual exists to guide their writing.
- It is less punishing to submit reports late than it is to get them in on time. When reports are submitted on time, the industrial engineering manager returns them for correction. If they are turned in late, the manager corrects them himself, sparing the engineers the tedious job of making corrections.

The consultant's finding led to a complete revision in the way report-writing was handled at the bureau. The revisions are summarized below:

- Inexpensive cubicles were constructed in the engineering department for writing reports.

- Members of the secretarial pool were assigned to aid the engineers.

- A report style book was developed and distributed to the engineers, specifying acceptable report format.

- Proposals accepted as a result of report data were circulated throughout the industrial engineering department, and contracts awarded by the bureau were also circulated.

The improvement in the bureau's performance was powerful testimony to the success of the new report-writing procedure: the bureau was consistently entering into agreements that provided for good service at the lowest possible cost.

As the State Utilities example graphically shows, all performance deficiencies cannot be remedied through training. These are *deficiencies of execution* (D_E) rather than *deficiencies of knowledge* (D_K). Praxis analysts have found that well over half of all performance problems are the result of execution deficiencies. The solution, then, is being able to tell the difference between D_E and D_K .

What is the result of training programs that aim to correct D_E ? Wasted time, wasted money, unimproved performance, an alienated trainee group — and little else.

Wasted time and money because program development and investments in trainee time off the job are fruitless. Also, *unimproved performance and an alienated trainee group* because training cannot remedy D_E and trainees who see no improvement in their on-the-job performance lose faith in their organization.

How can the manager with training responsibilities distinguish between D_E and D_K so that he can spend his money where it will do the most good? And how can he remedy D_E , since training solutions are usually inappropriate?

"Could the man do his job well if his life depended on it?" is the question training directors should ask themselves when trying to distinguish between D_E and D_K . If the answer is affirmative, the answer lies in the former.

Frequently, the training director

cannot ask the "... if your life depended on it?" question directly of the people whose performance he is studying. The checklist below gives him some tools for getting an answer.

The causes of faulty execution generally fall into one of three categories:

1. Poor feedback
2. Task interference
3. Punishment

Inadequate feedback is the most common cause of execution deficiencies. Basically, it is the failure to provide a worker with information about the results of his labor and how well or poorly he is meeting performance standards.

The State Utilities case is typical of execution deficiencies fostered by poor feedback. It was not that the engineers did not care about writing good reports. They just did not know the reports mattered so much.

A feedback system showed the engineers how their performance affected the overall success of the organization.

Task interference

The second most frequent cause of D_E is interference in performing the task. Task interference might take the form of prevention — lack of adequate tools. Or, it might be caused by competing tasks as incessant telephone calls or crises. Task interference is usually a straightforward procedure involving some sort of job engineering — changes in physical facilities, work flow or responsibilities.

In the State Utilities example, the lack of a style manual as well as the necessity of submitting reports in longhand interfered with completion of the reporting task. These conditions were remedied by preparing a style manual and by offering the engineers the services of the typing pool for the monthly reports.

In business, some jobs — whether grueling, difficult, mentally or physically exhausting — are punishing.

Sometimes punishment takes subtle forms, and management for-

gets or was never aware of the punishing effects of certain jobs and the execution deficiencies that are inherent in them.

Returning to our industrial engineers, the effects of turning in monthly reports on time — the desired behavior — were punishing. If the industrial engineering manager was not facing a deadline, he would bounce them back for copious (and punishing) revision. If, on the other hand, deadline was drawing near, the manager himself would correct the reports as best he could.

To minimize their punishment, the engineers slowly learned to turn in their reports consistently late. In this way, they did not have to face the task of reworking reports.

When a training manager finds that an execution deficiency is caused by punishment, what action can he take? A short-term, but not terribly pleasant remedy, is to make the results of a worker's performance deficiency more punishing than performing the task. Engineers who turn in reports late, for example, could be required to rework them on their own time even though the originals have already been submitted to upper management.

A preferable alternative to combating punishment with punishment is to put a premium on performing punishing tasks well. Turning in reports on time could become critical factors in performance review, merit increases and promotions.

Another alternative is to remove the punishing circumstances altogether. This was done at State Utilities by giving engineers the standards, facilities and typing support necessary to submit acceptable reports the first time.

Praxis has found that one of the most common errors training directors make is concluding that training is the solution to most performance problems. To offset this, Praxis recommends that all training analyses include the identification of D_E and D_K .

In many instances, non-training solutions are not only effective, but also less expensive than the most modest training program. ◀