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Briefing Notes:
Adult Learning

Some Basic Assumptions about Adult Learning

Since the 1940's the research and literature produced on training and adult learning have been so extensive that a new and sophisticated field has emerged. Incorporated within it are several basic assumptions about adult learning which are shared by the majority of trainers and consultant practitioners. The following is a compilation of the more important premises discussed in the literature:

1. Every adult can learn but individuals vary in the way they learn best. For many years, the prevailing belief was that it was waste of time to teach adults anything new because they were incapable of retaining and/or integrating it. Later research-rejected this notion but pointed out the value and necessity for different training methods which reflect the different problems and needs of experienced managers (Mant, 1969). This assumption has implications for the use of both experiential (group exercises, i.e., role plays) and didactic (lecture) materials and points to the utility of employing a variety of curriculum methods in training design (This, 1980).

2. The rate at which adults learn depends on their experience, interest in the topic, attitude in approaching the learning task and relevant stage of career development. Mant discusses this last point particularly as it relates to the differential needs of younger and older executives.

3. Adults will learn better and more quickly if they feel a need to learn and are involved in the process. Schein (1961) speaks of motivating one's need to learn and change through an "unfreezing" process that substantially disturbs a person's stable equilibrium. Lundberg and Wolek (1970) identify the pre-conditions of readiness for learning as minimal self-esteem identity and satisfaction of one's base needs. Maslow postulated a hierarchy of five basic "needs" levels and argued that an individual must reach some minimal degree of satisfaction with one level of needs before he or she will be motivated towards the satisfaction of a higher need (Knowles, 1980). Knowles (1980) stresses the importance of encouraging adults to diagnose their own needs and identify their own knowledge gaps as much as possible.

4. Adults are less willing to risk failure than children are. Delbecq (1979) and Knowles (l980) both emphasize the value of a learning environment that sets participants at ease, both physically and psychologically. Lundberg and Wolek state that fear and anxiety, which is ever present in each participant to some degree prior to training, only prohibits readiness. It is vital to establish and reinforce a climate of trust from the very beginning.

5. Adults are a rich resource of learning for both self and others. Knowles implies that the effective trainer will actually use and capitalize on the experience of the participants to make the learning material relevant, understandable and exciting for participants.

6. Adult learning is most effective when it involves a mutual learning teaching transaction. Delbecq (1979) and Knowles (I980) both stress that the trainer/consultant must operate on the premise that each adult is responsible for his/her own learning. In addition, the consultant should be prepared to serve as a facilitator and content resource person rather than as the "storehouse of all knowledge" on the subject. This means being prepared and willing to learn from the participants. This can be manifested in the distribution and use of evaluation tools, one for the participants to evaluate themselves and one for them to evaluate the usefulness and effectiveness of the training program.

7. Adult learning involves the whole being, including the emotional, intellectual and physiological functions. Knowles (1980) particularly discusses this point in contending that there are definitely superior conditions of learning and teaching which are more conducive to growth/change and development than others. Some of these, that have been mentioned previously, include:

   ◆ A learning environment which sets participants physically and psychologically at ease

   ◆ A training design which is varied in its use of teaching methods (e.g., case presentations, lectures, role plays)

   ◆ A design which seeks to incorporate the participants' ideas in the planning of the event

   ◆ Teaching methods and trainer styles which respect and capitalize on the experience level of participants

The foregoing material can be further condensed into a set of four basic characteristics of adult learners that ought to be the foundation for any training and development program:

1. Adult learners are experienced, proud and resistant to change. The literature suggests that the most effective training design is one which incorporates a sensitivity to the risk-factor, the difficulty of changing accustomed styles and habits and one which both respects and further capitalizes on the rich experience adult learners bring into training.

2. Adult learners are independent They abhor being disciples and as a result, may want a variety of mentors and models. They value feedback perhaps more from colleagues than from instructors and are self-directed.

3. Adult learners are problem-oriented. Theory and principles must be job-applicable or "relational." Adults want tools to solve real problems, practical material that can be brought back to the job and utilized immediately.

4. Adult learners are career-oriented. They value the credentials.

These four basic characteristics are well appreciated as design principles by professional trainers and management development consultants. However, program applications in many organizational settings seldom demonstrate as complete a respect of these principles as might be expected.

Reasons for the sometimes-limited application of adult learning principles include a variety of organizational and programming constraints, as well as a frequent lack of imagination on the part of program designers.

Another factor is the availability of an almost endless variety of pre-packaged training materials that address management, supervisory and communications problems. Packages of this kind, while sometimes of high quality and sophistication, are inevitably "imported" into the organization. They usually impose their own additional constraints on the program in which they are employed Not only can they "miss the mark" with respect to issues and situations that most directly concern program participants but they may also trivialize the difficulties of transferring classroom learnings to real on-the-job situations. In our experience, more effective adult learning can be fostered through designs that:

■ Couple classroom experiences more tightly with on-the-job experiences.

■ Focus not only on the individual learner but on the members of the integrated work group that form the settings in which each individual must apply new learnings.

■ Draw on concrete tasks and issues that are directly connected with the work itself.

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