

Edgar H. Schein and Warren G. Bennis

Personal and Organizational Change Through Group Methods:
The Laboratory Approach. New York: John Wiley & Sons,
 1965. pp. X + 376. \$8.90.

The field of laboratory training, T-groups, basic encounter groups, and the like is a confusing one, partly because it is new, partly because little basic research has been published, partly because it is multiplex, and mostly because the terminology which infests it has a curious distractive quality. Schein and Bennis have made a brave attempt to clarify some of the chaos in this descriptive book.

Of interest to almost anyone in the social sciences, but particularly to these in government, business, and industry, the uses of groups to change systems and persons have been many and various. The use of a group to plan things is probably as old as human communication. But the self-conscious process which these authors delineate started about 20 years ago. One of the most valuable sections of their treatment is their attempt to define what laboratory training is, and their description of what a "typical" residential laboratory is really like. This clear and detailed section comprises chapter 2. Unhappily, to this reviewer at least, the book, like its subject, rather quickly gets out of hand in subsequent sections.

The authors valiantly try to explain the values and goals of laboratory training -- the reasons why persons are gathered together for limited amounts of time to interact with one another so that the participants will have "a total and integrated learning experience." (p. 10) They speak of two "meta-goals:" a spirit of inquiry, and expanded consciousness and choice. (pp. 31-32) But soon after this we find that the goals (presumably non-meta) of such training include self-insight, understanding conditions which inhibit or facilitate group functioning, understanding inter-personal operations in groups, and developing skills for diagnosing individual, group, or organizational behavior. (p. 35) There is little doubt that many of these

goals are ones we would wish to see reached, but one is left at the end of the book wondering just why this particular method is of such over-riding importance. The authors present several evidences of success in laboratory training, and it is clear that they are practising advocates of the method. But they are fair-minded enough to include the hesitations and even the outrage of its critics and three brief case studies of laboratory training programs that failed.

As the authors note, some of the confusions and disagreements which dog discussions of such group methods stem from the two fairly distinct purposes for which they are used. On the one hand there are programs which attempt to change individuals, especially but not always individuals who are in some manner deviant. These are the various sorts of therapy groups. On the other hand there are groups brought together to effect organizational change--usually these are sponsored by an organization which wishes to effect change in its subsections, and which evidently operates rather like an old-fashioned conference married to a pep rally, but more intensively than either. What contaminates much of the writing on these two species of group work is that the latter aim --that of changing an organization --is brought about by changing the individuals within the group--in other words accomplishing for organizational purposes a little bit of what the therapy groups are trying to do for individuals. The authors recognize and note the difference in basic aims, but in much of their book it remains unexplicit for the specific operations they describe.

Another reason for feeling somewhat at sea as one reads the various descriptions of both theories and programs is a somewhat insufficient consideration of basic values as they relate to the process. It is all very well to plump for inquiry and expanded consciousness, and for self-insight. But are there values violated by the processes which laboratory training postulates to bring them about? What, as an instance, becomes of the value of privacy in the T-group process? The cries of "brainwashing" that have been reached as some critics cavil at "groupthink" are certainly specious and off the point, and there is certainly nothing inherently wrong with a clean brain. But is there not a possibility that some people would prefer to launder their brains in private?

What this all may boil down to, then, is that if you want to

develop knowledge about groups, sensitivity in groups, and to be a successful member of successful groups, laboratory training has an effectiveness which, though perhaps not yet demonstrated with towering scientific evidence, is at least generally acknowledged. But if these matters are not your purpose then you should be able to remain outside the human relations laboratory. This matter of choosing not to enter laboratory training is also discussed by the authors who are clearly against coercion but point out that it is "particularly hard to avoid in those cases where the entire organization undergoes laboratory training," as in many industrial and governmental programs. (p. 215)

Perhaps, in view of these and other unresolved philosophical and ethical problems, it is impossible to describe the virtues of laboratory training to everyone's satisfaction at this time in the general development of the method. In the meantime, this book contains much that is informative, especially for those in personnel work. In addition to chapters on the uses of laboratory training, and research and theory on it, seven of the 18 chapters are by consultant authors who contribute first-hand experience with certain kinds of groups. Outstanding among these are the chapter by Robert R. Blake and Jane Srygley Mouton explaining how a modification of laboratory training was used in connection with their celebrated "9,9" approach to industrial productivity (pp. 169-183), and that by Matthew B. Miles whose experimental study of T-group work with elementary school principals is presented as a possible model for research methodology in the thorny problems of measurement of outcomes. (pp. 244-254) There is an appendix on how a laboratory is run and what points to consider when running one, and a selected bibliography, as well as a full list of citations.

Personal and Organizational Change Through Group Methods might prove enlightening to the curious who know little of this now widespread phenomenon in the United States, and will be of interest to professionals who wish to learn about recent developments in the field. At the same time, however, it cannot begin to be said to answer all questions and clarify all ramifications of laboratory training, and the authors do not claim this for it. Those intolerant of ambiguity, who want their information orderly and complete, are warned away from it. It is a competent survey of a field incompletely explored.

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