SENSITIVITY TRAINING IN JAPAN

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On the train journey from ·Tokyo to Karuizawa where I was to take part in a ten-day residential sensitivity training laboratory for Japanese industrial managers and government administrators, I couldn't help but feel apprehensive about my first experience of this form of training in the Far East. There were two reasons for my uneasiness; one, I was to act as dean to the training staff, and two, the working language of the T-group laboratory was to be Japanese.

On our arrival at the mountain resort of Karuizawa, everything seemed very much as in the West, with men in dark grey suits carrying briefcases. They entered the hotel looking furtively at one another and (uncharacteristic of England or America) bowing slightly in greeting as they made their way to their rooms. The atmosphere was full of what might be called in T-group jargon, 'anxious anticipation'

At dinner, just prior to the beginning of the course, the participants sat next to one another very quietly, making what appeared to me (which was later confirmed by the interpreter) to be very polite conversation. This was very similar to the events which would take place in England or the U.S. at this point in time. The trainers were at a table by themselves and from time to time I found us staring at the participants, while they were desperately trying to glance at us without being too obvious. After dinner we had a plenary session where the staff ritualistically introduced themselves and made a few brief comments about the purpose and method of the training. We then broke up and the participants were separated into two groups and sent off to two different group rooms. My role during this course was the trainer to the staff group, which consisted of four T-group trainers (two in each group) and four apprentice trainers who, like myself, watched the two groups from another room fitted out with closed-circuit television. In addition, I had available to me an experienced T-group trainer as my interpreter, who simultaneously translated the 'content' and 'process' of the two groups. His cogent analyses were invaluable to me, and without his skill, both as an interpreter of content and 'process monitor', the experience would have been impossible.

The session opened up, as you frequently find in the West, with complete silence. Somewhat uncharacteristic, from the point of view of an Occidental, was that the Japanese trainers did not make any preparatory remarks but just sat silently with their arms folded, staring into space. The real difference between East and West became apparent as the silence, instead of lasting ten or fifteen minutes, continued for nearly two complete sessions. Non-verbal forms of communication were taking place however, as the participants seemed to move from an uncomfortable silence to a more peaceful, almost meditative one. From tense sitting postures, the participants began to move their bodies more freely. Some participants changed their positions to sit on the floor with their legs crossed in the traditional Japanese style. Finally, after nearly five

hours of silence they began to talk to one another very briefly and quietly, and yet deliberately.

The trainers began to intervene - initially on a task level - describing effective leader behaviour, the uses of groups and other 'content-type' topics. This continued until about the fifth session at which time there seemed a dramatic change of emphasis by the trainers. The trainers in each group, almost as if it were planned (although I later discovered that it was spontaneous), started giving 'personal feedback' to one of their group members. The feedback was direct, personal and fairly threatening. The participants in the groups seemed shocked by this sudden change of events. The recipients of the feedback sat very quietly while the trainers continued to express their feelings. The participants' bodies were rigid against the contours of their chairs in an almost paralysed posture. The trainers then lapsed into silence, the head and eyes of the participants were concentrated on the floor. The silence went on and on, and the session went into 'over-time' as *'rigor mortis'* set in and all the participants began to look like wax replicas in Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum. Then suddenly, in both groups at different times, the individual who had been the unwilling recipient of the feedback got up, walked up to the trainer and dropped to his knees crying and bowing. He asked for forgiveness from the trainer, bowing continuously.

The trainers acknowledged his gesture and the participant thanked him over and over again. He then arose and proceeded to go round the circle bowing and begging forgiveness from each of the participants in turn. When he finally reached his own chair he stood erect and began to sing a folk song, which my interpreter told me was a traditional Japanese boyhood chant. He sang this song with tears in his eyes, and at the end of it smiled and sat down, looking relieved and satisfied.

The observing trainers, the interpreter and I had a long chat about this sequence of events which none of them found unusual, in fact they later confided that this was a normal occurrence during the first week of the course.

Whereas in the West the experiential methods (psychotherapy, sensitivity training, encounter groups, etc.,) used to enhance an individual's self-awareness and social skills rely on interpersonal behaviour feedback, this is not the case in Japan. Although the values of self-understanding are an integral part of Japanese religious life in the form of Buddhism and Shintuism the road to *'nirvana'* is internal, by meditation. This is reflected in this Buddhist verse:

Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Take yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Work out your own salvation with diligence.

In fact, Japanese mores and norms prohibit direct confrontation as a method of achieving self-awareness or enlightenment, which can be seen in the often satirised behaviour of the Japanese as courteous, polite and inoffensive. The behaviour of the participants described above can be more clearly seen in the light of this East/West difference. Given personal feedback in public was to them an indication that they must have insulted the trainer. To make amends they humbled themselves by crying and begging forgiveness. The singing symbolised the freedom from personal indebtedness (after the trainer acknowledged the apology of the participant).

The trainers' reactions were also interesting. In one case, the trainer went

along with the ritualistic ceremony and accepted the role of 'victim' without further discussion. This, in my view, was unfortunate in that he helped to create and maintain throughout the group the powerful role of trainer - 'judge and jury of appropriate behaviour'. In the other group, the trainer had them focus on what had happened and what the recipient of the feedback and the other group members felt about it. He started the discussion himself by indicating that he didn't like and, in fact, resented being put in this omnipotent role. After disclosing his own rather strongly expressed feelings it seemed as if the other members were also able to do so. On the other hand, no discussion of this kind developed in the other group and similar events recurred with similar consequences. In addition, as the trainer's role of group father figure grew, he began to interrupt group and individual behaviour from 'on-high'. Although some of his interpretations were interesting and relevant, the group remained frozen in an unresolved authority issue. This kind of an issue, although common in the West, is more difficult to explore in a country like Japan with a tradition of clearly defined hierarchical relationships. Once this pattern was established in the group it was very difficult to examine.

After internalizing this event, I realized, for the very first time, the full meaning and importance of cultural differences. I was now concerned about my role. Could I cope as the consultant to the staff group? Could an expatriate American living in England cope with a culture so complex and different from any I had known?

It was at this stage that I decided to get my 'cultural bearings' and I spent the next two days listening, absorbing, and above all, avoiding trainer-like interventions. Gradually I began to play a more active role with the staff group; questioning, confronting and supporting. What I found particularly difficult was confronting the dean of the lab, who had sponsored my trip to Japan and was a very powerful person within the human relations movement. At first, I felt that he was resisting my comments, hiding behind the language barriers. After a while, however, I could see that more and more of the staff were confronting him, particularly the apprentice trainers and it seemed as if a dialogue was developing. Focussing on and resolving the issue of the role of the authority is a particularly important one in Japan. This even applies to people involved in the laboratory training environment, where many of the issues within the wider culture outside still manage to creep in and grow into focal points of group, inter-group, and organisational life.

On balance, then, my training experience in Japan was extremely valuable. It made me realize that a major responsibility of any international change agent or consultant is to acclimatize, to internalize, to incorporate the essence of the culture before attempting to practise his skills. In the end, it was I who learned more from the experience than they, it was I who was led to the important discoveries about human behaviour, about my role, about my self-image as a consultant.