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The Problem of Language in Training Groups

Communication problems exist wherever people meet together. Training groups in Zambia are no exception. But our problems are intensified by lack of spoken English and correspondingly poor comprehension of English. Working in a vernacular has not yet been tried. There are 27 different languages spoken in Zambia and the changes of all participants belonging to the same language group are small.

In a recent Youth Leadership training course this problem became very acute as the educational level was only about Form II. Apart from the natural reluctance to verbalize feelings some participants lacked the vocabulary to do so.

Early in the life of the group we made a list of all the feelings we could think of. We then asked for a volunteer to decide on a feeling and to dance it before the group. Each of us recorded his guess of what feeling was being danced. On analysis 50-75% of guesses were correct or very nearly so. Immediately after this we analysed the behaviour we had observed and wrote down the salient points on our list. After a few different feelings had been thus presented, participants realised that all feelings could be expressed in dance and that each one of us was much more competent at it than he had realised. From then on members were asked again and again during crisis situations to 'dance what you feel'. Communication at this level made a powerful impact on the whole group.

Feed-back on significant behaviour shown by individuals was often cumbersome as too many explanations were required. I hit on the idea of acting out the significant behaviour, eg., Alfred's voice always began loud and clear and then trailed off to be inaudible. I let myself drop to the floor just like his voice. Alfred was reduced to hysterical laughter. Next morning he started talking about his voice. It came out that he was a long distance runner. Before long he admitted that he too had fallen, just like the trainer, 100 yards from the finishing line at the end of what was to him, personally, a crucial race. Rather than accept defeat he had 'collapsed'. This enabled him to look at his own behaviour in relation to many different situations.

Group members often have difficulty in articulating what is happening in the 'here and now'. Drawing match-stick figures and symbols expressing blocks seem to help a group to get going again. Usually the consultant draws the first picture on newsprint stuck on the wall. The idea catches on quickly, particularly with groups who show resistance to the use of body movement.

These techniques seem to open up new ways of communication. The impact often seems very clear and powerful. They also help individuals to gain confidence as they learn to express themselves in new ways.
