# The Individual Psychology of Proper Training for the Job

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Among the founders of modern depth psychology, Alfred Adler was the only one to recognize fully the importance of work in the life of the individual. While Freud and Jung concentrated on individual problems and conflects, Adler always considered the sociological aspects of the individual's difficulties. He never forgot that the individual is but a member of society, and that the solution of his problems depends on his ability to adjust himself to the larger community. The degree of his adjustment, Adler postulated, can be measured by the way in which he fulfiills his obligations toward society, by his work performance. Work, love, and integration into society are the cornerstones of our lives, the three main tasks whose satisfactory solution alone insures a full and happy existence.

However, even Adler only made a promising start. He never found the time to investigate more extensively his theory of the importance of work. The same holds true for other leading theoreticians of the school of Individual Psychology. It is surprising to note how little research has been done in this field. Apart from a monograph by Erwin Wexberg (4), and several smaller articles, the whole problem seems to have been pretty much neglected. While accepting Adler's premise, Individual Psychologists have not yet sufficiently explored its consequences.

One of the more obvious implications of Adler's hypothesis seems to be that the individual must choose his job or profession very carefully. In order to find satisfaction in his work, the individual first should know the work that is best fitted for him. This suggests the necessity of expert vocational counseling before the decision is made, that is, before a future profession is chosen. Yet, while there are many agencies available today who specialize in this field, it is still far from being the rule to consult them whenever the necessity arises. For this situation, however, vocational conselors and industrial psychologists themselves are partly to blame. Many of them seem to have a wrong

conception of their own work. They do not seem to realize that it is not their primary task to serve the employer but rather the employee. All too often they do not recognize that the most satisfactory work performance can only be achieved when the individual feels that his own interests, desires and abilities have been sufficiently considered. Failure to pay attention to the individual's welfare first and foremost must result in distrust and open or hidden resistance against the counselor.

Individual Psychologists have done their share to correct this wrong conception. They have criticized the assumption that passing economic conditions are more important than the interests and the welfare of the individual seeking advice. They have warned against overestimating the results of a single intelligence test. They have stressed the significance of courage and training, as against the search for talent or the lack of it (3). Indeed, some of them have gone so far as to suggest that everybody could learn everything, provided he gets the proper kind of training.[1]

## I

To accentuate the importance of training is perhaps the most significant contribution which Individual Psychology has made in this field. Yet the problem has not been followed up. Assuming that the individual has chosen the "right" job, how does he get the proper training? What technical and psychological factors are to be considered in such a task? How can employer or management provide the kind of training that makes the employee like his work, and thus insure a more lasting satisfaction?

The honest answer is that we do not know as yet how to translate theory into practice. However, we are not completely at a loss. Some work has been done in this direction, notably by industrial psychologists, who have increasingly learned to recognize the importance of this particular factor. While in no way solving the problem, their findings provide a broad foundation on which future research work can be based.

The first and most obvious conclusion of industrial psychologists is that a realistic, well-planned training program should start on the first working day. Strange as it may seem, this is far from being

[1] Notably Wexberg and Birnbaum.

universally recognized as a natural and logical presupposition. In this country as well as in Europe, it is often more by accident than by plan and skillful training that an employee learns his job. While some employers, foremen, and supervisors use their own unproved pet theories, others have no theory at all. They propose that learning should proceed by "trial and error," not telling us, however, how the correct conclusions can be drawn from the inevitable mistakes.

To remedy this confusing and often costly situation, industrial psychologists suggest a simple plan. The method was first tested in the psychotechnical institutes of Germany and Switzerland, where special emphasis was put on the initial training.[2] Its essence is the idea to divide each individual job into as many single parts as possible. Training occurs in such a way that each part is taught separately, one after another. The basic rule is that the following step is only taught when the preceding one has been fully mastered.

Actually, the whole procedure is not as simple as it sounds. There is first the necessity to make logical divisions which are easy to understand and easy to teach. Second, the trainer must be skillful in detecting and correcting errors and mistakes. Third, this kind of training demands patience and persistence. One must not try to push the worker, to hurry a development which can only mature very slowly.

However, if these rules are observed it should pay handsome dividends. Swiss and German experiences suggest that the duration of apprenticeship training can be cut considerably by following this method. The same holds true for skilled jobs in factory production. What happened actually was that not only the initial training was shortened, but that the quality of work performance was improved as well. The new method proved itself superior whenever it could be compared with the older, traditional way of training.

## II

However, successful training does not stop at this point. Rather, this is only a beginning. To regard increased productivity and better work performance as an end in itself may defeat the original purpose, namely, to insure satisfaction with the job. Human beings do not react kindly to treatment that is only designed to increase the profitability of their work. That is why industrial psychologists, who tend

[2] The German word is "*Anlernen*."

to overemphasize this point, often meet with open or hidden resistance which frustrates all their efforts.

Individual Psychologists would like to go several steps further. Not denying the value of well-planned initial training, they regard it merely as a means to a more important end. Thus, the next logical step is to show and to explain to the trainee the relation of his work to other work done in the same process. The worker should learn to understand the purpose of his work; to know what is happening before and after he gets it. In a word, he should be made aware of the importance of his particular job; he should realize why he does this kind of work and what his function is in the whole work process.

That this suggestion is not only of theoretical value can be illustrated by the following example. An operator in Manhattan's garment district told the writer this instructive story. One day, a new style was introduced in her department and the forelady showed her the operation she was to perform. For some reason or other, she could not completely master her new work. Finally, she had a bright idea. "Show me what the girl is doing that has the following operation," she asked the surprised forelady. After seeing the next operation, she suddenly understood her own work and how it had to be done.

Yet even more important than these practical considerations is another factor. We live in a highly mechanized civilization. The individual worker is no longer a master craftsman who performs a complete work process. Rather, he is a more or less skilled specialist who often contributes only a tiny part to the completion of a product. He is a small cog in a big wheel, and one that is always changeable and dispensable. He can no longer have the sense of satisfaction and dignity, of pride in his accomplishment which was the reward of the skilled journeyman or guild-master in earlier times.

To offset partly the negative characteristics of present-day working methods, we suggest that a new employee should become acquainted with the whole working process. No recipe can be given as to how this should be done. It all depends on circumstances. The explanation might be given verbally by employer, foreman or supervisor. Or the new worker could be led around, could be introduced to other employes who would themselves explain what they are doing. The whole procedure might last one hour, several hours or even several days, according to the size of the institution and the complexity of work that is being done.

The employer, of course, would not immediately profit by such an arrangement. Yet, in the long run his initial investment should be repaid manifold. There is all the difference in the world between a responsible worker who knows what he is doing and why he is doing it, and one who is dull and listless because nobody ever bothered to explain to him why it is necessary to do this particular job. The predominance of the first or the second kind of worker is no accident. It is largely up to the employer or boss to create the atmosphere in which either type can thrive.

## III

During the thirties, a neat little experiment was performed by a group of industrial psychologists. They wanted to find out the correlation between the color of the environment and the work performance. For this purpose, they selected a group of workers whose working place was painted in a drab gray. The psychologists changed the wall painting into a light, merry green, and waited for results. As it were, the hypothesis seemed to work. Individual output increased about thirty per cent.

Fortunately, our psychologists were not given to hasty conclusions. After a while they decided to re-test their hypothesis. The same workers were subjected to a new experiment. The walls of their working place were again painted in the old drab gray color. The result was even more surprising than the first time. Instead of the expected decrease in performance, individual output again increased twenty per cent.

The mystery was solved when the workers were interviewed. Everyone of them explained that he felt much better because he believed that management had singled out his group for special attention. They thought that painting the walls repeatedly was a reward for the quality of their work. The increase in productivity was their way of showing their satisfaction with this official recognition.

The story has a morale which is, unfortunately, not very widely recognized. It shows that employes will go out of their way to do satisfactory work if they feel that their own welfare is the concern of the employer. Money is not all-important in this connection. While an honest day's pay for an honest day's work is a presupposition of good employer-employes relations, there is more than this one factor involved. Much depends on the kind of treatment the employes get.

If they feel that they are treated decently, that they are more than just instruments for making profits, they will respond with eagerness, goodwill, and the voluntary desire to do their best. There are many people known to the writer who prefer a lower salary under pleasant working conditions, rather that a higher paid job in an environment in which everyone has to fight against everybody in order to keep his position intact.

## IV

In his book *Escape From Freedom,* Erich Fromm (1) suggests that creative work is the best prophylaxis against the development of neuroses. As Individual Psychologists we can agree with this thesis without reservations. The suggestion is excellent. Yet, unfortunately, not many people have the opportunity to do creative work in our present economic system. However, Fromm has pointed out an important problem. If we cannot provide each worker with the opportunity to do creative work, what can we give him as a substitute? The fact is that such substitutes are available. One of them is the policy of giving the individual worker a sphere of responsibility. This can be done even with the smallest, the least important job. If each worker has his own domain in which he alone is master, he might conceivably recapture some of the pride in his work which was characteristic in earlier times.

Closely connected with this policy is the development of personal initiative. In this country, there is presumably a premium on diligence, thrift, and initiative. The story of the poor boy making good is still a shining example for many people. Yet, in practice we find that not much is done to animate the individual employee to get ahead. Few are the places where individual initiative is encouraged, where the participation of workers is sought whenever important policy decisions are made by the management.

That such a positive policy is not an utopian ideal can be easily proved. In prewar Germany, the firm of Zeiss-Ikon in Jena was famous for the friendliness of its labor-management relations. Zeiss workers were given a voice in all matters that related to their work. Zeiss management followed the simple formula of having the interests of their workers foremost in mind, and the results of this policy were not only sizable dividends, but also the fact that not a single working day was ever lost by a strike or labor dispute. In this country, too,

similar experiments are being carried out. An article in a recent issue of *Life* magazine describes in detail the human relations program of the Crown-Zellerbach Corporation in Camas, Washington (2). Its essence is the recognition that employes work better if they feel useful and happy instead of lost and unwanted. Employes are encouraged to learn about the company—everyone knows how much the president makes—and to participate in company business. The following sentences are quoted verbatim from *Life*:

> . . . Management never starts any employe activity without consulting with the union and does not like to stay in anything it can turn over to the employes. Grievances are invariably caught before they erupt. Absenteeism is astonishingly low, some workers having been away only two or three days in 20 years.
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> In 18 years since the plant was first unionized, not one day has been lost from labor-management disputes. "If you stay with this company for five years you are hooked," says one employe. "You like it so well you decide you might as well make it your lifetime job—and most of us do."

## V

In the whole process of training employes, no other factor is more important than the attitudes and behavior of the foreman or supervisor. His is the central strategic position in the prospective scheme. Success or failure of any training program largely depends on his ability to translate theory into practice, to use skillfully the Individual Psychological approach in his relations with the people he has to supervise.

That this should be the case is not too surprising. The supervisor is a key figure in every productive process. He sets the pace; he determines the "climate" that prevails on the working place. It is, literally speaking, in his power to make hell or heaven out of work.

Thus, if an employer desires to apply the principles which were outlined earlier, he should, above all, select the supervisors carefully. Technical proficiency is important for this job. Yet even more important is the ability to work together with other people, to produce teamwork and co-operation, and to avoid frictions and discontent.

What, then, are the characteristics of a well-qualified supervisor? [3]

[3] The following suggestions apply to female as well as to male supervisors.

To begin with, he should be a balanced, well-adjusted person. He should have a genuine liking for people. He should be able and willing to understand, and to co-operate with, any training program that his employer cares to put into practice. His social interest should be sufficiently developed to prevent the irrational use of his power over employes for self-aggrandizement and self-glorification.

More concretely speaking, the supervisor should be a very patient man. He should not try to hurry the individual employee's training. He should give him sufficient time to adjust himself to a new job situation. He should be able to create an atmosphere in which the employee would not be afraid to make mistakes and to admit them. Industrial psychologists have long ago recognized that the making of mistakes is a necessary part of any successful training program. So, too, the supervisor should be able to view a mistake not as an attack on his authority, but as an opportunity to explain again and again how things could be done in a better way.

The supervisor should be aware of the importance of praise. A job well done should always be recognized in words and deeds. As Individual Psychologists we know that each individual strives for personal attention and recognition. This is not a negative quality as long as it is based on productive work and achievement instead of neurotic symptoms. The ability to do a job well is one of the most important means for achieving a sense of personal validity in our mechanized civilization. To encourage and foster such an attitude on the part of the employes, by giving praise where praise is due, is one of the most significant functions of the supervisor. Nothing goes farther toward creating goodwill and co-operation than the realization that good work is appreciated by the boss and supervising personnel.

By the same token, the supervisor should always try to avoid negative criticism. There are many situations which call for a critical appraisal of an individual's work. Every human being is liable to make mistakes. Yet nothing can be gained by treating these mistakes as willful, intentional sabotage as so many supervisors do. Nothing will be achieved by a nagging, personal critic. If criticism is justified, then it should always be an objective and constructive critic. It should not be used as an opportunity to make oneself bigger by making others feel small and miserable. Rather, it should be seen as a chance to point out, in a friendly dialogue, why the mistake was made at all, and how it could be corrected.

Such an attitude demands, above all, a well balanced personality. The supervisor should not shrink from responsibility. He should not try to blame others for mistakes which he could have avoided by foresight and better training. There is a widespread tendency in our time to seek for scapegoats whenever something goes wrong. What dictators do on a grand scale with their subjects, the supervisors often do on a smaller scale with their subordinates. Rather than admitting their own responsibility for mistakes they blame others for them. The results are in both cases the same. There is nothing more effective in destroying confidence in a leader (in the work sphere or in politics) than the feeling that one is used as a scapegoat for errors which he has not made.

Thus, we come back to our original proposal that supervisors must be selected very carefully. Of course, there is hardly anyone who fits the ideal qualifications. Yet we are not looking for the ideal type but for the person who approximates it. It is also important to realize that the art of working with and supervising human beings can be taught and acquired. It is not an innate talent but a quality which can be developed in most persons through proper training. Most supervisors would like to get along with the employes. The trouble is that they do not know how they should proceed with this task.

Major corporations have acquired the habit of sending their more important executives to the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration for advanced training. This is a wholly recommendable practice. Yet, on a smaller scale something similar should be done for foremen and supervisors. They, too, need advanced training in handling human beings, in putting into effect a human relations program.

There is no dogmatic rule as to how this should be done. In Switzerland, which this writer knows best, progressive firms send their supervising personnel yearly to training courses which last two or three days. These courses, given by one or several industrial psychologists, consist partly of lectures and partly of discussions. They are centered around practical problems which the supervisor will meet in his daily contact with employes, and provide rational solutions for these problems. The emphasis is on improving employer-employes relationships, and experience shows that this goal can be attained to a considerable extent, once the supervisor understands what he can and should do to make it attainable.

In this country, several solutions are possible. The supervisors could be trained by the firm's own industrial psychologists. Or, like in Switzerland, a group of firms could combine to sponsor such a training program. The most logical solution, however, might be the proposal to center the responsibility for such training in the personnel office which is hiring the supervisors in the first place. Yet, how such a program is being carried out is perhaps not as important as the spirit in which this is being done. If it is prompted only by the desire to increase productivity of work performance on the part of the employes, then it will ultimately fail. If, on the other hand, it is based on the genuine intention to increase co-operation between labor and management and to provide more satisfaction with the daily work, then it can be considered as an investment that will eventually repay not only monetary rewards, but one that will also serve a useful, humanitarian purpose.

## VI

This writer is associated with one of the largest libraries in the United States. In 1950, a management firm surveyed the operations of two major departments of this library. The result was a two-volume report which explained in considerable detail how operations could be streamlined. Each work process was analyzed accurately, and the surveyors made concrete proposals as to how waste and inefficiency should be eliminated.

There is nothing wrong with such a survey. However, one factor was disturbing for this writer. The surveyors noted an excessively high turnover of personnel in the library. Yet while every single work process was investigated extensively, this human problem was not considered at all. The surveyors did not forget anything that could increase efficiency of work; they even suggested that one department should buy new office furniture for twenty thousand dollars in order to attain this goal. But not a single suggestion was made on how to decrease the high turnover of personnel, which may ultimately be more costly for the library than an occasional duplication of effort.

This neglect cannot be easily explained. It seems to have its roots in a basic philosophy. There is, in this country, a strong tendency to overestimate effiiciency and to underestimate the human factor. Americans worship efficiency; but all too often they tend to forget that it

mostly depends on human beings whether a job will be done efficiently.

This is probably one of the most important problems of our time. Work can and should be more than merely an opportunity to make money. The worker should be more than a tool for making profits. What must be recognized, above all, is that work is more than an economic necessity. It is perhaps *the* most important way in which many people can express their personality, their basic needs and strivings. To find fulfillment and satisfaction in work is the best prophylaxis against neuroses and maladjustment.

Any remedial efforts which would de-emphasize efficiency and re-emphasize the importance of the individual human being's welfare must of necessity come from the employer. In the preceding pages such a program was outlined. We do not suggest for a moment that these points should be adopted slavishly. Much will depend on environmental circumstances. Yet, to adopt half-hearted measures will not bring much improvement either. What is needed is a well-planned program in which all the pertinent factors are considered. And, what is even more important, we should not forget for a single moment that this should be a human relations program, designed to increase individual satisfaction, goodwill and cooperation. If it results in increased productivity and efficiency, as it well might, so much the better. Yet, these must always remain factors of secondary importance, effects rather than causes, if a human relations program is to succeed.

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