

# LEARNING VIA LAB

The conference room wore a very unusual look. The physical setting was no different than that of any other, of which there were perhaps thousands all over the country. Yet, the ambience was palpably different; almost bordering on the alien.

The participants, all of whom were senior management staff of various companies, appeared extremely tense and fidgety although they were trying their best to put up an indignant and slightly unconcerned front. None of them had any papers as the meeting which was in progress had no agenda. Most of them were irritated that the conference leader had done nothing to set the ball rolling save making an opening remark at the outset which was extremely short and lacking in direction. His exact words were:

"Here we are. I feel slightly uneasy because I don't know any of you, nor do I have any idea as to what's going to happen in this group. My only reassurance is that we are all in the same boat. So, where do we start?"

This extremely peculiar statement on the part of the conference leader was followed by a painful silence all around which lasted for a full 2 minutes as the participants struggled to find out what was expected of them. Thereafter, a few of the participants tried to bring in a semblance of civility by engaging in small talk. The attempts failed miserably and despite some aggressive provocation by a few outspoken participants, the conference leader maintained a stony silence and refused to give either direction or structure to the meeting.

It will perhaps be clear by now to the initiated that this is a typical 'T-group' session in progress. T-group training, variously known as sensitivity training and laboratory training, is one of the most significant psychological inventions in the post-World War II era.

Building on the theoretical underpinnings provided by the legendary Kurt Lewin, the first T-group session was designed and held in 1947, in Bethel, Maine (US) to provide training in developing human relations skills. Thereafter, an organisation called the National Training Laboratories (NTL) took up the movement and popularised the newly developed technique in industry, thus enabling managers and executives to avail of its benefits.

T-group techniques used today for corporate clientele -

## SUGATO LAHIRY

popularly known as laboratory training, lab for short - are based on the conceptual framework of Lewinian thinking, Gestalt psychology and client-centred therapy developed by Carl Rogers.

The movement was imported into India in the sixties and slowly gathered momentum 'till it finally managed to secure a tentative foothold. At present, there are 3 premier organisations - Indian Society for Applied Behavioural Science (ISABS), Indian Society of Individual & Social Development (ISISD) and HRD Network - besides the 'well-known management institutes, providing lab exposure to about 250-300 business executives every

year. Yet, unlike in other countries, lab has failed to gain widespread acceptance in Indian business organisations and has never been considered a part of the teaching mainstream.

Also, despite its more-than-a-quarter-of-a-century presence in India, lab remains the least understood training technique. Some regard it as a pitcherful of magic dust capable of curing all executive ills of unknown etiology and dubious prognosis; others consider it an elitist sojourn into the freakish grey pastures that are the exclusive preserve of behavioural scientists, while popular myth has it that going through sensitivity training is a bac-

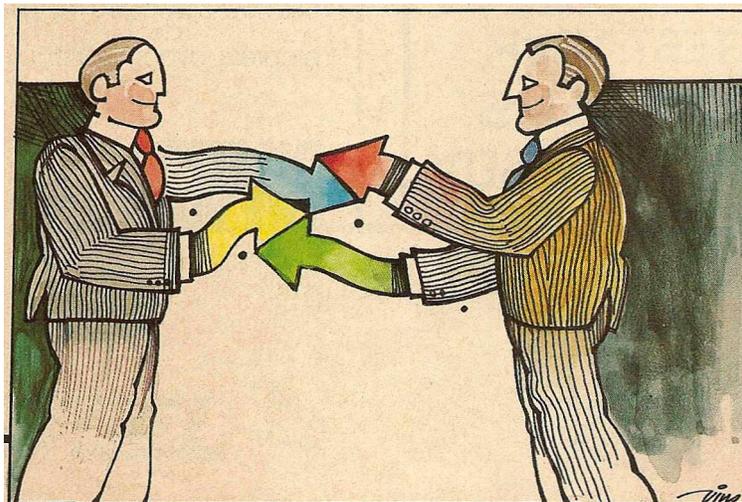
calaureate requirement for a professional passport to human resources development (HRD). Because of these, wildly far-fetched perceptions, the true potential of lab has remained undiscovered and the organisational benefits of one of the most potent social inventions of our times have not been fully realised in India.

Lab requires managers to stay together as a group, away from the familiar organisational and family settings, usual-

ly at a distant location, and places the participants, who are strangers, in a highly unstructured group situation 'where the task, and the objective, of this group meet are intentionally left unspecified. In such volatile settings, and as the trainees struggle through the mounting tension and anxiety that such lack of structure inevitably brings about, most of



**L**aboratory (lab) or T-group training is a very effective way to improve managers' interpersonal skills



the normal social codes of interpersonal behaviour become inoperative.

The facade of insincere civility is replaced by free unhindered expression of negative feelings of irritation, anxiety and stress. The freedom of expression leads to reduced defensiveness and free flow of interpersonal feedback to the group. Slowly, painfully, and tentatively, another very different set of group norms develop where tact and guile are dispensed with in an atmosphere of free and open communication. This reinforces self-exploration and disclosure of hidden parts of the self which gradually paves the way for greater self-awareness and increased sensitivity to and understanding of others.

These group learnings carry over to other relationships outside the group and to the workplace and thus improve the trainees' interpersonal relationship skills. Throughout this entire process, the trainer maintains a non directional, non-prescriptive stance and interacts with group members primarily to facilitate expression of both feelings and thoughts.

Chris Argyris, in an article 'We must make work worthwhile' in *Life* gave a very fine description of his experience of a lab session involving the top management team of a large organisation. The description runs as follows:

At the outset, after defining the objectives of this educational experience, the seminar leader said, in effect:

"Okay. Let's go." There was a loud silence and someone said: "What do you want us to do?"

(Silence)

"Where's the agenda?"

(Silence)

"Look here, what's going on? Aren't you going to lead this?"

(Silence)

"I didn't come up here to feel my stomach move. What's up?"

(Silence)

"Fellows, if he doesn't speak in five minutes, I'm getting out of here."

(Silence)

"Gentlemen," said the treasurer, "we've paid for the day, so let's remain at least till five."

"You know, there's something funny going on here."

"What's funny about it?"

"Well, until a few minutes ago we trusted this man enough that all of us were willing to leave the company for a week. Now we dislike him. Why? He hasn't done anything."

"That's right. And it's his job to do something. He's the leader

## Unlike elsewhere, lab has not gained widespread acceptance in Indian business organisations

and he ought to lead."

"But I'm learning something already about how we react under these conditions. I honestly feel uncomfortable and somewhat fearful. Does anybody else?"

"It's interesting that you mention fear, because I think we run the company by fear."

The president turned slightly red and became annoyed: "I don't think that we run this company by fear

and I don't think you should have said that." A loud silence followed. The vice-president thought, took a breath, looked the president straight in the eye and said: "I still think we run this company by fear and I agree

with you. I should not have said it."

The group laughed and the tension was broken.

"I'm sorry," the president said. "I wanted all you fellows with me here so that we can try and develop a higher sense of openness and trust. The first one that really levels with us, I let him have it. I'm sorry - but it isn't easy to hear about management by fear ...."

"And it's not easy to tell you."

And the group plunged into the issue of how they judge the openness of a person - by the way he speaks or by the way he behaves?

Learning, as might occur from exploring feelings and receiving intensely personal feedback, does entail a certain amount of risk. In fact, the lab method has attracted flak from both academia and industry on this count. It has been defined as a psychological bloodbath and a mental nudist colony. There have been reports of psychological breakdowns and occasionally of psychotic episodes suffered by some people following a lab experience. While such damages, rare as they may be, are certainly a cause for concern, it is quite likely that individuals who have suffered such damage might have lacked the emotional resilience to benefit from such intensive group experience and should have never been sent for lab exposure in the first place. In fact, it is a sombre reminder that lab is an extremely potent tool, and not merely a faddish toy to casually fiddle around with. On the other hand, if such cases were commonplace, NTL would have closed shop by now, and at home, companies like ITC that have been using labs regularly in their training programs for quite some time would have stopped holding them long back.

All things considered, labs can be a very powerful

means of personal growth when they are used with caution, supported by an upfront need analysis and a realistic appraisal of the mental health of the individuals concerned.

