Social Interaction Skills

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This issue, by its theme and its contributors, strongly affirms the value of developing the human resources of the library organization. We endorse this attention to the “people” approach. Specifically, our concern here is with the social interaction skills needed by those human resources for personal effectiveness within the library and in the relationship of the library with its client system, be that public, academic, or school system.

The role we see for the library is based on the ability of that organization, through the information and services provided by its staff, to support the thinkers and doers who enable our democratic society to define and meet its goals. Basically, this role is a linkage function.

As libraries serve this role institutionally, librarians and library educators are links in a more directly personal sense. Librarians are links in the sense of knowing and meeting the needs of their clientele through the resources and services of the library. Library educators are vital links in knowing and meeting the professional demands of the field through a relevant curriculum of pre-service education and continuing educational opportunities.

To be effective, these human links require not only knowledge and expertise with regard to information organization and its distribution, but also with regard to the social interaction skills needed in interrelating with colleagues and clients and the implementation of programs both in and outside of the library. For our use here, we regard social interaction as “a generic term for the exchange of meanings between people . . . all the various ways in which people can and do

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express themselves in face-to-face meetings.  More specifically, we will be speaking of such competencies as communications, collaboration in shared decision-making, and problem-solving.

Our purpose in this article is to briefly explore the nature of the need for social interaction skills, how that need grows out of the library as a human organization, what the behavioral sciences have to offer to our field in the development of social interaction skills, and to present a sample model to illustrate the laboratory method which the authors feel on the basis of their experience in creating learning climates to be the best means for learning social interaction skills.

Awareness of the value of social interaction skills is usually given explicit acknowledgement as being a common sense ingredient of good leaders, educators, and administrators. But too often the awareness that some "have it" and some do not is regarded as the end point. We consider this more promising as a beginning point and will go in some depth into ways that these skills can be developed and suggest human relations training methods as a means by which libraries can become more effective organizations. We address ourselves equally to library administrators, library educators, and librarians in general.

Whether or not libraries in our organizational society are effective depends in large measure on their ability to function and move toward their goals. The effectiveness of organizations is primarily dependent upon their ability to integrate the talent and skills of their members into a team working toward viable and understood goals. Goals are the very raison d'etre of the organization. Yet, Etzioni points out that in achieving the goals of the organization it is imperative that the needs of the members of the organization, as well as the clients and the organization itself, be satisfied.

Argyris extends this and warns that unless needs and goals of both the organization and the individual are accommodated, the institution will begin to falter. Thus it would seem that library administrators and staffs need to address themselves to a clear understanding of their goals as an institution and direct their attention to the goals of the individuals who are members of that organization as well as to those who are its clients. Library literature, insofar as it is representative of the field, indicates that neither the goals of individuals nor those of libraries as institutions are very clearly articulated or commonly understood.

Several recent studies have pointed to the need of all levels of service in the library for sound social interaction skills—those needed in ad-
administration and supervisory responsibilities, those needed in work
groups, and those needed in serving present clients and in reaching
out to broader clientele. Judging from these expressed needs, the de-
velopment of these skills has apparently not been found to an adequate
extent in the professional education curriculum or in staff development
programs. Yet present trends in librarianship reveal the growing emerg-
ence toward participative management styles, emphasis on
client-centered services, social consciousness and the need for ac-
countability to justify allocation of scarce (and ever scarcer) resources.
These trends call for the increased ability of library staffs at all levels
to work together within their organizations and with their clients. This
ability to work together effectively becomes even more crucial in the
light of the ever increasing pressures for change in our institutions and
our society.

"Although a number of popular articles have discussed human re-
relationships in libraries, there have been few basic studies." McCoy's
comment in 1953 seems equally true today. But that should not be a
limiting factor, for the literature of applied behavioral sciences is rich
with research, analysis, and even handbooks for building social inter-
action skills. Lopez and Rubacher point out that "Quick to adapt and
adopt the advances of relevant technologies to Technical Services,
librarians have been slightly less receptive to the advances made in the
behavioral sciences. Such 'selectivity' can only be, in time, detrimental
to the professional growth of the librarian, the library as an institution
and to the patrons, for whom it exists." 5

Surace is more specific as she foresees that libraries will be organized
differently in the not-too-distant future. Signs of this are now being
reported in the library literature on administration. She notes that
"one of the reasons will be the continuing influence and application
of the behavioral science methods and techniques in management—a
human relations approach that clearly places the emphasis on human
understanding, group organization, the responsibility of management
to the worker, and fluid, task-oriented organizational structures." 6

As librarians we must be aware of our own responsibilities in this
area, and not simply to hand over the responsibility to the "experts"
as we seem to have done too often in the case of adopting modern
computer processes in libraries. Gomersall says, "The manager should
look to behavioral scientists not to solve his problems, but only to pro-
vide needed information about them. To ask the scientists to do more
robs the manager of his charter . . . the behavioral scientist is operating
within his proper realm of responsibility if he serves as a change agent by assisting managers in planning the application of theories and principles and by giving visibility to their achievements.“

Librarians in the field express their great need for more ability and knowledge in management skills and interpersonal relationships. The need for these skills in working with colleagues and clients is often greater than the need for those technical skills directly related to the processing of information. Thus it becomes essential that we, as librarians, look to resources beyond our own professional literature and research. Reluctance on the part of the library world to look to other disciplines for information and knowledge that could be utilized in the field of librarianship might prove fatal as well as foolhardy.

Sound research developed in the behavioral sciences has significant implications, for libraries and library systems are complex organizations working to serve a complex and changing society. Lippitt documents how management in all fields is turning increasingly to the behavioral sciences to discover a deeper understanding of the human element within the increasingly complex organizations with which our society operates. This is also true of the service professions—health, education, social welfare, etc. Each of these fields is coming more and more not only to rely on the literature and research of the applied behavioral science field, but also to increasingly generate its own professionally oriented findings using concepts and methods now available from the behavioral sciences. Librarians need to use the behavioral scientists as they themselves seek to be used by their clients—as resources in their own problem-solving processes.

Although it may be stating the obvious, organizations are made up of people—not people in isolation from each other, but rather, people in groups. Social interaction occurs in several dimensions—two people interacting with each other, group members interacting within their group, groups interacting with other groups and with the total organization including all its members and groups. The total organization is made up of many diverse groups which result in a complex mosaic of intergroup relationships. Social interaction skills are necessary in each of these dimensions.

Homans points out that the relationship between one individual and another represents man’s most natural attempt at socialization. This one-to-one relationship is inevitable and necessary in any organization. A great deal of what is accomplished depends in large measure on the mutual effect each has on the other in the relationship. This is
true in staff relationships, in librarian-client relationships, and in faculty-student contacts.

One-to-one relationships are perhaps most frequent in most library organizations. However, much of the direction and work of any organization is done in groups. Studies of how a group behaves in terms of its leadership, goals, communications, and memberships have developed a substantial fund of knowledge in applied behavioral science for individual and organizational behavior. In addition to the one-to-one and within-group relationships, the behavioral sciences have recently begun research in the group-to-group relationship. It is here that much of the organization's decision-making and social interaction skills become so significant. Two prominent contributors in the area of groups working with groups are Chris Argyris and Warren Bennis who employ research in group concepts to bring about planned change in organizations.

Since human relations training methods have been shown to be the most effective method of really learning about human relations and since they are not widely used in library education, we would like to make clear what we mean by human relations training, specifically, laboratory education.

“Human relations research and training is very much interested in studying the processes of social influence and in helping individuals use such knowledge in building fuller and richer lives for themselves and their associates. It is equally interested in helping people develop skills in building more effective groups and organizations.” If human relations training is directed solely at personal growth objectives, it is not justifiably the responsibility of the organization to provide it. However, when organizational objectives as well as personal objectives are tied together, it is justifiable for both the commitment of the individual and the organization. In connecting these two aims—personal and organizational—human relations training becomes most real for the individual lives within the organizational structure, and the organizational structure consists of individuals. To divorce the two is unrealistic and non-productive. Human relations training achieves most of its objectives best when it deliberately and carefully integrates organizational tasks and goals with individual tasks and goals. Our most successful workshops and institute programs over the past two years have shown the most definite impact where these two realms are brought together in design, programming, implementation and evaluation.
The most productive method for human relations training has been shown to be laboratory education. Laboratory education, very simply, is experiential learning. It is based on the adage that experience is the best teacher—learning by doing, in other words. Knowledge and skill in human relations become real and significant, not through lectures and books, though those might help, but through direct observation and participation in actual events. In laboratory training some of the learning comes from the educator, but most comes from the interaction of members. Thus direct laboratory learning enhances a person’s ability and skill in working with others and includes a sharpening of the perspective on his “growing edges” where he needs to find alternative modes of behavior which will enable him to more effectively fulfill his objectives in working with others. It is learning which occurs through a process of interacting with others who are directly seen and related to by the person.

Relationships are always present, so learning about human relations is a lifelong process. Laboratory learning is designed to help each individual recognize his own potential and to increase his ability to work more effectively with others in a variety of situations—not only immediately but as a continuously renewing experience. It relies on the most effective learning environment—one which encourages free expression of thoughts, ideas and feelings and which contributes to understanding, insights and skills of individuals, groups and, ultimately, the organization. Programs involving laboratory training, as any other staff development programs, must address directly the specific purposes and needs of the organization as well as the individuals in the program. Schein and Bennis affirm that, in their opinion, “laboratory training has come along at just that point in time when these twin needs of interpersonal competence of the individual and development of organizational effectiveness are at their peak. Not that laboratory training is itself capable of solving these problems; but it is one tangible and vital method which can be applied to examining and diagnosing them.”

More specifically, the National Training Laboratories pinpoints the learning objectives and outcomes of laboratory training as follows:

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<th>SELF</th>
<th>INTERPERSONAL AND GROUP RELATIONS</th>
<th>ORGANIZATION</th>
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<td>Own feelings and motivations</td>
<td>Establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships</td>
<td>Understanding organizational complexities</td>
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Correctly perceiving effects of behavior on others | Finding a satisfying place in the group | Developing and inventing appropriate new patterns and procedures

Correctly understanding effect of others' behavior on self | Understanding dynamic complexities in group behavior | Helping to diagnose and solve problems between units of the organization

Hearing others and accepting helpful criticism | Developing diagnostic skills to understand group problems and processes | Working as a member and as a leader

Appropriately interacting with others | Acquiring skills of helping the group on task and maintenance issues |

The aim in designing learning experiences is to apply those methods that best accomplish the goals of the program. Typical methods drawn from various sources and used in laboratory education usually involve the following:

1) face-to-face grouping in some form of structured or unstructured group depending upon the goal to be achieved;
2) planned activities involving interaction between individuals and groups;
3) a systematic means of providing frequent “feedback” and analysis of information regarding what happened in the “here and now” and with what effect;
4) a continuous means of evaluating the needs of the participants and a means of adjusting the program to meet those needs; and
5) attempts to make generalizations and apply what is being learned to the “back-home” situation.

As Knowles points out, this method of human relations training is the most effective approach to the learning of adults. Both professional and continuing education concern themselves with the adult learner. Laboratory training as awareness of self and social processes has been with us for more than two decades. A good deal of research has centered on the effects of laboratory learning: there is no question that the approaches are diverse and that innovation continues in this developing methodology. However, the common goal of training staff and participants is to promote more effective action as individuals, in groups and in organizations.
Perhaps the most frequently asked question is "What are the lasting effects of laboratory education upon individual performance and interaction in the work setting?" Boyd and Ellis in their study report that not only are there more frequent changes of action but also more varieties of action on the part of the participants in laboratory learning after they have returned home. These findings are corroborated by Miles in his experimental study concluding that laboratory participants were seen to have changed much more significantly than the control subjects in perception by self and by others in a predicted direction.

In two articles, Bunker comes to somewhat the same conclusions but perhaps a bit more tentatively. He feels that although we have evidence that new perceptions and behavioral capacities gained through lab learning can be translated into adaptive behavior changes in the participant's home setting, it cannot be said that all persons learn in a laboratory or that more change, individual change, takes place in a laboratory setting. Participants are seen by co-workers as having increased significantly in cognitive openness, behavioral skills and understanding of social processes. Schutz and Allen concluded that after a period of six months participants changed in a positive direction with respect to the participant's self-concepts and behavior and feelings toward other people, as well as behavior of others toward the participant.

How does one go about developing more effective social interaction skills, or attempting to teach them to others? One of the ways it is not done is through the usual formal classroom technique. This is given eloquent testimony by McGregor who speaks about the crucial importance of these skills for effective managerial problem-solving and who notes that the relatively small amount of research evidence available indicates two things:

1) effective learning in this field requires the solution of some exceedingly complex problems, and
2) lasting changes in behavior as a result of conventional classroom methods are quite unlikely.

He goes on to point out that most of us have been barraged by inspirational lectures at conferences on human relations which give some new words and rationalizations that tend to defend or protect our present behavior rather than change it to become more effective. In McGregor's opinion there are two current educational methods which
appear to bring about significant improvement in the skills of social interaction—one of these is psychotherapy which is not only expensive but time-consuming and “the other method is a form of ‘laboratory’ training developed during the last dozen years.”23 He points out, “One of the very real problems connected with this highly unconventional approach to education in the skills of social interaction is the difficulty which participants have in communicating meaningfully about the experience after it is over. They often succeed only in making the program sound highly mysterious and esoteric.” 24

Since we agree with the behavioral scientists that lab learning is the best means of achieving the development of social interaction skills, we have sketched a sample model employing this method to develop the skill of co-operative work relationships. Employing the method of laboratory education, this model has been designed as a practical sample of ways professional librarians and library educators might implement a program to develop the skills of social interaction.

Agreeing with Argyris that “the important human relationships are not only those related to achieving the organization’s objectives but those related to maintaining the organization’s internal system and adapting to the environment, as well,” 25 we present on the following pages a model which seeks to fulfill three purposes simultaneously:

1) build interpersonal competencies and social interaction skills in individual staff members;
2) strengthen the ability of the staff to work effectively as a collaborative team on organizational problems; and
3) initiate the managerial mode of democratic decision-making and provide a base for its continuation.

The primary purpose of the model is the development of effective working relationships among organizational members. “Team building” is rapidly becoming one of the most effective techniques in developing social interaction and individual skills which contribute to organizational effectiveness.26

The methodology and approach used are as important to achieve the intended outcomes as is the content focus suggested. The concern for content is not eliminated, but the coverage of that content is built in such a way as to allow maximum participant interaction since the primary goal is the development of effective relationships among organization members.

The process of building social interaction skills is most usefully
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accomplished in the organization if they are developed simultaneously with other organizational activities. For instance, task groups (i.e., committees, departmental staffs, task forces) meeting their assigned responsibilities more effectively is a prime objective for training procedures. Yet interaction skills such as the processes of communications, the helping relationship and group dynamics can be achieved at the same time and support, without impairing, the basic aim of the training. The effective working relationship built by the team members can then be used for other tasks, and its members may be dispersed through the organization as an aid in facilitating other groups.

Team building is a deliberate effort to provide structures that enable a work or task team to "experience the unique and indispensable part each plays in accomplishing the common task." Its success depends on the real possibility of full, individual participation in designating responsibility and making consensual decisions. Each member speaks for himself through a process of mutual, open sharing, each acting and feeling shared responsibility for each other member and the group as a whole. The ideas and feelings of others on the team are heard and responded to.

"The fundamental building block of an organization is the team. Any given organization team is composed of those who work together to discharge that part of the total organization's work for which they share responsibility. Such teams have the basic elements of all groups." Basic guidelines for a group engaged in team building consist of the following: a setting and climate which facilitates communication, shared decisions made about group time and agenda, and shared responsibility for carrying out that agenda. The basic method is to plan and accomplish something together as a team, and then, continuing as a team, to discuss what happened and what was learned from what happened.

All direct team building activities stem from the development of team objectives. This fundamental function facilitates the team building process by engaging the team in the meaningful task of building its objectives—the essence of the laboratory method. Specific structured activities enable this to happen. Activities would vary in accord with the nature and purpose of the group. Single suggestions are made as examples in three different situations—groups with assigned responsibility, self-directed groups with old and new members, and a self-directed new group. These show a sampling of the range of team building possibilities on a staff.
For a group with assigned responsibility, an important part of team building is the opportunity for all members to reach agreement about the way in which those members with specific responsibilities carry them out. The individual (or individuals) with assigned responsibility clarifies in writing how he sees his responsibility and what he would like to do to carry it out. The group is then divided into smaller groups and they discuss what they would like him to do to fulfill his responsibility as they see it. These “mirror views” of role and responsibilities are then shared in a discussion exploring and resolving the areas of agreement and differences, concluding with a clear cut agreement between the group and the responsible individual about the most effective way they see to accomplish the assigned group task.

In a self-directed group, without a specific assignment, initial objectives must be set jointly. If the group combines both old and new members, the initial task could be to evolve, through working in dyads which pair old members together and new members together, what they feel to be the most important objectives of the team. These results are then shared and discussed by the total group to explore the perceptual differences and evolve the objectives for the total group.

A design for groups that know each other and have worked together before uses a basic triad structure. In each triad, two members tell the third what they think he believes is the most important objective of the group. He then clarifies his view of the group’s objective. Each triad shares its agreed perceptions in discussion with the total group. This discussion considers what objectives appear most often and evolves which objectives are shared by the group.

Each of these designed structures provides the group with a primary task function of any group—the establishment of clearly understood objectives to guide its work, and the primary process function of any group—learning how to work effectively together in their interaction. “Observations of its own group process and a diagnosis of its own effectiveness are . . . interwoven with the actual problem oriented work to facilitate learning about itself and how it can become more effective as a team.”

Initial team building efforts can be sustained and can continue to grow and be a learning experience if, at the end of each meeting the group looks at each team meeting evaluatively, identifying the feelings of members and the strengths and weaknesses of it and reflects on how the next meeting can be more effective. “A focus for looking at
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their own group may be introduced in a variety of ways. One of the commonest is simply to ask the group, after a number of sessions, how they feel about their own progress as a group and what suggestions they might have for proceeding more effectively . . . . Most groups find a discussion of their own process fascinating and pursue it with vigor once the door is opened to this possibility.”

Models for developing social interaction skills lend themselves to use in a staff development program in a library, in formal library school courses or in continuing education opportunities offered by professional organizations and state agencies. We express a word of caution, however. Whether the models are used in an orientation, inservice, on-the-job training program, or a combination of these, or as a means of looking at the whole system, one should not attempt to implement them without some consultative help from people who have experience in the laboratory method. We underscore this caution to prevent any possible misapplication of the method and consequent deleterious results.

In the final analysis what we have been really talking about is change and people. Within every organization the greatest resource, we feel, is its people. Consequently, it would follow that the development of this “people” resource would result in more effective organizations. The development of interpersonal relationships in the form of social interaction skills is something that can be done and done now. We do not have to wait for huge money resources to do it. The research mentioned and our own experiences show it can be done effectively by what is suggested here. Most importantly, we stress that social interaction skills are best learned not by “manipulating” people and “teaching” them something, but rather it is more effective—and ethical we believe—to manipulate situations by creating environments wherein people “learn” at their own rate according to their own needs and learning style.

The best means of developing these social skills is by the laboratory method. The classroom and formal lecture-type methods alone have not been able to develop these important skills. By means of laboratory learning we should be able to develop librarians in both pre-service and inservice education who will become more effective in achieving the service-oriented goals of the library. We have presented a model based upon the laboratory method and principles of adult learning and programming in the hope that they will stimulate action programs to implement the development of social interaction skills. A word of
caution was introduced not to implement these programs without some form of consulting help from people experienced in the laboratory method.

As we began so we conclude—our concern is with the people within organizations and their development. We believe that as social interaction skills can be developed within the individual, his knowledge, skill and insight into group and intergroup behavior will be increased. This organization, in this case the library, can thus become a more effective social institution. As librarians we function within an organizational structure wherein there exists an ongoing social process with our colleagues and clients. To be more effective we need to develop our human skills in order to better understand ourselves, others, and our organizations.

References

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23. Ibid., p. 221.

24. Ibid., p. 223.


29. Ibid., p. 90.

30. Ibid., p. 93.

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