

‘One Night in Connecticut’:
Alternative Narratives in the History of T-group Training

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Abstract

This paper explores the history of T-group training in relation to management development by tracing its roots back to the work of the US National Training Laboratory (NTL), founded in 1947, and by analysing the rationale for adoption of the method by members of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the UK in their Leicester Conferences in the period from 1965 to 1975. Although NTL is widely recognised as having laid the foundations of the T-group method, the role of the Leicester Conferences in promoting T-group training in the UK is less commonly acknowledged. By way of background T-groups are defined as small, intensive group encounters that focus on the immediate process of group interaction and seek to achieve change through self-expression. The method relies on a reversal of societal taboos, prioritising frankness and encouraging confrontation by emphasising personal relations within the group and eliciting remarks based on an individual's subjective experience of verbal and non-verbal group interaction (Back 1972). Although some authors seek to distinguish T-groups from encounter groups and sensitivity training, these approaches are in practice closely related (Highhouse 2002) and therefore, in this paper we treat them synonymously. T-groups were associated with organisational and managerial development from the very beginning, being reflective of a broader societal trend in the 1960s and 70s towards experimentation with various forms of 'New Age' spiritualised psychology under the umbrella of the Human Potential Movement (Puttick 2000). At the height of their popularity in the 1960s T-groups were experienced by thousands of senior executives,

written about in the popular press and academic journals and recognised in the field of organisational development as a useful technique for changing human behaviour in organizations (Highhouse 2002).

In this paper we argue that the textual accounts of the historical development of T-groups display many characteristics of a folkloric genre, portraying Lewin as a heroic historical figure elevated to legendary status by virtue of his discovery of the T-group method. The beginnings of T-group training are typically traced to the Research Centre for Group Dynamics at MIT, led by Lewin who is heralded as having accidentally discovered the method as the following account illustrates:

In 1946... Lewin was contacted by [community group leaders in Connecticut] to assist in the training of leaders who would deal with intergroup tensions... The training... was organized by Lewin to include three continuing learning groups, each with a leader and an observer, who was to record interaction among the participants. Lippitt was recruited to lead one of the groups, and he, in turn, recruited Benne and Bradford to lead the other two. *What happened next has become legendary in the annals of NTL and the field of group training.* At the start of one of the early evening observers' sessions, three of the participants asked to be present. Much to the chagrin of the staff, Lewin agreed to this unorthodox request. As the observers reported to the group, one of the participants, a woman, disagreed with the observer on the interpretation of her behavior that day. One other participant agreed with her assertion and a lively discussion ensued about behaviors and their interpretations. Word of the session spread, and by the next night, more than half of the sixty participants were attending the feedback sessions, which... became the focus of the conference. Near the conference's end, the vast majority of participants were attending these sessions, which lasted well into the night. *Lewin, Bradford, Benne, and Lippitt knew that something exciting had happened, a new and important method of adult learning had been discovered and needed development.* This methodology confirmed Lewin's beliefs that experiences shared by the training group, learning by experience rather than lecture and reading, provided high potential for diagnostic study, evaluation and, most important, for changing behaviors... Could this process of group building and learning derived from it be used in a variety of organizational and community situations, nationally and cross-culturally? The four men were determined to find out. *The Training Group was born.*

[<http://www.ntl.org/about-history.html>, emphasis added]

Through analysis of archive documents held at the Tavistock Institute relating to the Leicester conferences of 1965-1975, this paper seeks to provide an alternative narrative account of T-groups, which gives voice to participants involved in the conferences. It is argued that the role of the Leicester Conferences in the development and spread of T-group training in the UK is rarely acknowledged and that the accounts of conference participants are seldom written into the historical narratives of T-group development. Founded in 1947, when the Tavistock Clinic was absorbed into the newly founded British National Health Service, the role of the Institute was to continue research and practice

into the new science of therapeutic intervention to resolve behavioural disorders (Miller and Rose 1988) and to apply these theories and techniques in the context of work organizations (Newton 1994). Launched initially with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Institute rapidly became independent and self-supporting (Trahair 1993), focusing on the 'human problems of productivity' in industry through academic research and consultancy (Brown 1967). Members of the Institute worked closely with the National Training Laboratory (NTL), contributing to and drawing on the work that had been carried out there (Back 1972).

The T-group method that Lewin and his colleagues are presented as stumbling on and subsequently developing was adopted by members of Tavistock as a signature of the two-week residential Leicester Conferences. The 'Leicester model' was intended to uncover the hidden and non-rational aspects of group dynamics using various group events to facilitate experiential learning about the ways in which group processes can generate psychotic anxieties and institutional defences (Miller 1989). By promoting T-group training the Institute sought to bring a scientific basis to organizational development (Evans 1982; Steele 1970), drawing on psychoanalytic theory and presenting research results to demonstrate the effectiveness of the techniques which were widely taken up by British managers (Pettigrew 1985). However, this pursuit of scientific validity and respectability existed in tension with the aim of questioning overly rational, scientific perspectives on being human; T-groups were also criticised for being cult-like and potentially psychologically damaging (Back 1972).

We conclude the paper by suggesting that despite the dramatic decline in the popularity of T-groups in management development, the method still exists in assimilated form under the guise of spiritual management development (Bell and Taylor 2004). For example, Vaill (1990: 343) sees T-groups as capable of producing spiritual discovery essential for managerial leadership despite having 'become largely passé' and generally dismissed as 'one of those kooky things we played with in the 1960s'. Similarly, NTL continues to use T-groups in workshops for senior managers where the method is suggested to be linked to workplace spirituality through a common focus on realizing the 'inner being' in order to achieve one's full leadership potential (Hanna and Glassman 2004). The same ethical issues that led to criticism of T-group training in the 1950s and 1960s should therefore be raised once again in relation to contemporary spiritual management development.

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