

Sensitivity training's devotees  
have a hard time explaining it,  
but they get good results from. . .

*'The Experience'*

By TIM RICHARD

Persons who are zealous about sensitivity training refer to it, in hushed tones, as "The Experience."

"It's like a religious experience because of its depth," says one suburban man who has been a T (for training) group leader. "I've heard high school students say that after they've been through it, they can spot another person who has been through it just by looking at them. They recognize the light in each other's eyes. They've been through The Experience."

There is an "in" feeling among persons who have been through sensitivity training. That feeling in becoming more widespread as increasing numbers of persons and groups try The Experience. Sensitivity training is probably a more widespread phenomenon in these suburbs than the use of ouija boards, fortune cards and seances.

Many church groups with young persons are involved. Hi-Y clubs in high schools get into it. Ford Motor Co. is reported to have given it to some of its foremen, and union stewards say they don't recognize the foremen when they return -- "they behave like human beings now."

IT'S HARD TO FIND literature on sensitivity training. There are virtually no books. Much of the periodical literature is just plain bad: a Livonia girl, writing in a Hi-Y publication, gave this floundering definition:

"Sensitivity training is a method whereby people learn to better understand life situations through an understanding of and recognition of individual persons, themselves included."

Time after time, high school students feel ecstatically happy after a training session, and time after time they confess they can't put it into words.

The qualified trainers and organizers are little more help. They are wary of the press--far more so than even the Birch Society is. Almost naively they will ask a newsmen: "Do you intend to write a favorable or unfavorable article?" It doesn't help to say you want to be objective and honest. They keep bugging you about "favorable or unfavorable."

WHY THEIR touchiness?

For one thing, a lot of zany practices have been labeled sensitivity training, and the more responsible practitioners want to disassociate themselves from the zanies.

For another, a National Education Association writer is predicting a right-wing attack on ST any day now: "The furor over sex education in the schools may turn out to be mild compared to the protest over sensitivity training."

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Explains a National Training Laboratory pamphlet: "Most T-group participants gain a picture of the impact that they make on other group members. A participant can assess the degree which that impact corresponds with or deviates from his conscious intentions..."

"It is important to understand that different people may see the same piece of behavior differently--for example, as supportive or antagonistic, relevant or irrelevant, clear or ambiguous..."

Trust between members of the group is important. In one popular exercise, members pair off with the persons from whom they feel the most distant. One member of the pair is blindfolded and is led around by the second--perhaps even to the edge of a swimming pool.

Non-verbal communication is useful in showing participants how they make impressions on others without words. The members may mill around and make eye contact between each other. The members may touch one another (One of the political attacks on ST is based on pictures of touching exercises in racially-

A third reason, at least in this metropolitan area, was a series a year ago by Gary Blonston of the Detroit Free Press. Sensitivity people shudder at the mention of Blonston's articles, which began: "I have just returned from an emotion-charged six-day visit to a psychological Land of Oz."

And yet, when you get right down to it, sensitivity training is neither shocking nor superstitious nor sexy nor scary nor subversive.

*"O wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see oursel's as ithers see us."*

—Robert Burns

ONE THING, for sure, sensitivity training is NOT. It is NOT a form of psychotherapy. It is NOT for people with emotional problems.

It is an educational tool. It's not a technical tool, like a knowledge of accounting or engineering. It's a tool for dealing with people -- oneself included.

It takes no skill to issue an order, for example. But it does take sensitivity to understand how someone reacts to your statement; to comprehend how you look to him.

You learn to listen to others -- not just their words but the words' inner meanings and the other person's feelings.

It is not a doctor-patient process like psychotherapy. It is a group learning process, with rarely more than a dozen persons. Commonly the persons are strangers or near-strangers, but that's no rule. The group may be of one sex or mixed. The group is guided by one or two qualified trainers.

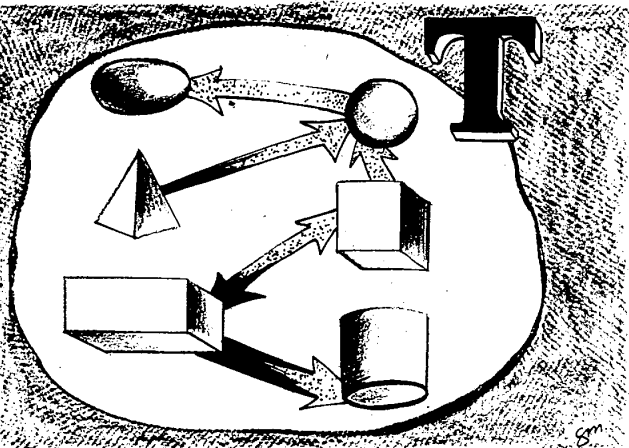
(One tip: If the group is mixed, try to balance it between males and females. A young woman who was alone in a group of men still shudders at the way the men singled her out to vent all their hostilities toward women--"A bad Experience," she said.

Sensitivity training has nothing to do with such direct group problems as how to increase production and sales, or how to raise money for the worthy cause. It deals in emotions. Sometimes feelings are hurt.

Yet for whatever attacks are made on sensitivity training, it produces good results for most practitioners. They come out of it happy. They feel they can relate better to their peers, superiors, subordinates, friends, strangers. It's hard to condemn something that gets results.

THE HIGH PRIESTS of ST are located at the National Training Laboratory in Bethel, Maine.

For about 10 years, NTL was part of the National Education Association's adult educa-



tion service. In 1967 it became an independent, non-profit corporation.

NTL conducts summer training programs in Maine, New Hampshire, Missouri, Utah and California. It trains trainers -- the persons who run T-groups--and develops programs for government agencies, private industries, church and civic groups, educational institutions.

Robin Dorr, an NEA writer who spent two weeks in Bethel last year, gives this authoritative report:

"NTL sensitivity training was first known as T-group. Some new versions of it are referred to as encounter groups, personal growth groups and marathons. By whatever name, NTL sensitivity training involves a group of people who meet for various periods of time, under the guidance of a skilled behavioral scientist, psychologist, psychiatrist or a person carefully trained in the behavioral sciences.

"NTL does not, under any circumstances, condone the use of untrained or amateur persons as leaders or trainers" in T-groups.

"Depending on the specific focus of the group, participants may learn the characteristics of groups and group development, group decision-making and problem-solving, and various factors in organizational relationships and management processes..."

"THE T-GROUP is limited to from eight to 12 people plus the trainer, and the programs vary in length from two days to two weeks. There is no restriction as to age, sex, race or religion...Recently there has been an increase in inter-racial groups meeting in an effort to ease the tensions of a rapidly de-segregating society.

"No two groups are ever alike since no two people are alike...The role of the trainer (is) not as a leader but rather as an observer..."

"The group is relatively unstructured...and conversation can veer off at a 90-degree angle at a moment's notice. When a group of 12 strangers find themselves closed in an unfamiliar meeting room with no chairman of the board or other obvious leader-type, some very basic personality traits come to the surface in a hurry.

"If there are two leader-types, a conflict emerges, and group members find themselves taking sides. 'Born followers' emerge early in the first session for they shy from the responsibility of leading and demand that a member of the group or even the trainer take the leadership.

"As the session progresses, there are natural peaks and valleys of emotional reactions...As in real life, hostilities, loyalties, strengths and weaknesses develop. The group becomes a miniature world, a social structure within which the

individuals must learn to live, cope, compete, cooperate...

"Most group members try to make a total effort in order to experience the full meaning of the session. After all, no one forced them to come; the sessions are relatively expensive; the location is remote; and after the individual gets there, no one forces or even encourages him to talk or react.

"Informality is the rule in manner and dress. The participants call each other by first names, and comfortable slacks, shorts or sports dresses are worn."

RIGHT-WINGERS HAVE attacked ST because some groups, notably in California, have conducted nude sessions. Says Robin Dorr:

"NTL officials do not condemn nor condone the various groups currently operating in the country which conduct sensitivity training sessions in the nude. 'We are not prepared to evaluate nude groups operated by others, but we have had no reason to consider experimentation with nudity...It does not seem necessary as an aid to learning, and its relevance to our major purpose is questionable.'"

A chief attacker of sensitivity training is one Gordon V. Drake, former education director for Christian Crusade, the right-wing outfit headed by preacher Billy James Hargis. Dr. Drake, already well known for his attacks on sex education, sniffs some kind of Communist conspiracy in sensitivity programs.

This amuses the folks at NTL. As far as they know, no one behind the Iron Curtain is using Sensitivity training as it is practiced here.

# Some Techniques Of Training

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Trust between members of the group is important. In one popular exercise, members pair off with the persons from whom they feel the most distant. One member of the pair is blindfolded and is led around by the second--perhaps even to the edge of a swimming pool.

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mixed coeducational groups -- a traumatic picture for the racially biased.)

ST. TECHNIQUES can be adapted for classroom use. The National Education Association Journal, former parent organization of the now independent NTL, reported the following verbal exercise in its September 1969 edition:

"One student, called the reader, is placed out of view but within hearing of the class. He takes the first drawing of the five squares shown

1. 2.

here, and attempts to describe it to the rest of the class "so completely and clearly that each student can make one exactly like it."

The teacher then surveys the class to find out how many believe they have made the drawing correctly; then how many were actually correct. In part one of the exercise, only the sender may speak; the other students may ask no questions. This is "one-way communication."

In part two, the students are allowed to ask questions as the sender attempts to describe the five squares. This is "two-way communication."

"Typically," says the NEA Journal, "the following results can be observed."

"1. Two-way communication takes much longer.

"2. Two-way communication results in greater accuracy in the students' drawings.

"3. In one-way communication, the sender feels relatively confident; the receiver uncertain or frustrated.

"4. In two-way communication, the sender often feels frustrated or angry; the receiver, relatively confident."

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