SYSTEMS NEGOTIATION TRAINING

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Abstract

The paper presents a model developed in the U.S./Mexico border area for teaching persons the art of using their personal assets to gain access to highly impersonal social systems. The model focuses on the use of small group dynamics and psychodrama using articulated videotape feedback in the development of effective job-seeking behaviors. The model training format was used over a three-year period to train approximately three thousand persons ranging from incarcerated Mexican Nationals to college graduates in the art of accessing social systems. Most of the participants in the programs viewed themselves as 'victims' of powerful social systems and initially saw themselves as having no control over their lives. The model was successful in demonstrating to the participants the aspects of the human interaction process they indeed had control over and, that by exerting this control in a structured fashion, they could net positive results.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a model for training people in systems negotiation, the art of using their assets to gain access to highly impersonal social systems. The training methods described in the following pages can be applied to job search, entry into educational systems, or attempts to secure services or benefits from institutions and agencies.

Need for systems negotiation training

The problem of finding a job is one every individual who has ever worked has faced at least once in his life. The latest report of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that a greater number of people are seeking employment now than ever before in the country's history, and unemployment is at its highest level in 40 years.
In 1973 Jameson indicated that 95% of all job seekers pursue a new position in a 'haphazard manner.' Intercultural Research Incorporated (IRI) experience in conducting job search and systems negotiation training programs from 1979 to 1981 indicates that little has changed since Jameson's report. Some 99% of 3,000 low-economic individuals trained by IRI were seeking positions in the same haphazard fashion Jameson described. Those methods — primarily, asking friends for job leads to 'help wanted' ads — are clearly inadequate in today's highly competitive labor market.

Lack of information about and skill in job search leads eventually to a 'reject syndrome' characterized by feelings of inferiority and an image of oneself as the 'victim' or 'puppet' of an unknown force referred to as 'the system.'

**Experiments of the 70s: A shift in emphasis**

In order to deal with the reject syndrome, a variety of programs sprang up during the 70s, all focusing on changing the self-concept of the job seeker. This two-pronged approach — of providing the job seeker with new information about himself and new information about work systems — was in contrast to the occupational skills training approach, which has always been the thrust of Department of Labor policy.

Bolles (1978) noted that our society provides the job hunter with a variety of job-finding services, none of which works very well. These services often create and foster a continuing dependency on outside agencies, which keeps the individual in bondage, particularly if he or she must change jobs frequently.

The first experimentally tested program developed to help persons find their own jobs was conducted by Azrin, Flores, and Kaplan (1975). The program was successful in helping 90% of the counseled job seekers to find jobs, while only 55% of the uncounseled job seekers found work. Daily group meetings were held in which participants were taught to use a variety of job-finding techniques.

In another experiment, Azrin and Philip (1976) worked only with 'hardcore' unemployed — those receiving government aid and/or chronically unemployed. About 85% of those who attended at least two days of the daily job group sessions found employment within two months. Also, more clients found employment when their collection of aid was made contingent upon participation in the job program until they found jobs.

The 'Job Factory,' a four-week intensive training program created in 1976, combined labor market education, self-selling skills, and supervised job search activities (Fischer, 1979). Operating on the assumption that there is an immediate place in a normal employment market for the vast majority of unemployed, the Job Factory set about to give the participant 'the job of finding a job' in a supportive small-group environment. This approach has been replicated, with considerable success, by others (Wegmann, 1979).