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A Comparison of the Training Priorities of Clerical Employees and Their Supervisors

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A Comparison of Training Priorities of Local Government Employees and Their Supervisors

The training needs of non-supervisory personnel, as they perceive them, have been overlooked both by local governments and the public personnel literature. This article seeks to determine whether and in which ways the priorities of local government employees differ from those of their supervisors. Data from a survey of local government employees in Santa Clara County, California, are analyzed and suggest that whereas many employees view training as a means of acquiring technical skills, their supervisors may be more attracted to the potential for training in human development.

By
Peter J. Haas

Training programs in government agencies can be designed to serve a variety of functions. In the past, training was viewed primarily as a means of boosting the skills and job-related knowledge of workers so as to increase organizational output and efficiency. Contemporary managers have come to view training as contributing to a wide range of both organizational and individual needs.[1] The term "training" now connotes a variety of technical, managerial, and even interpersonal skills.[2]

Beyond enhancing the technical skills of employees, certain types of training may benefit a public agency by helping to make it more manageable, instilling "organizationally appropriate" decisions and behaviors in the workforce.[3] For the individual, training may pave the road for future promotions and career development, or may make the work experience more enjoyable.

The recognition of the individual's interest in training reflects in part the influence of the "new" Public Administration of the 1960's and 1970's. As Nigro and Nigro remark in the influential text on the "new public personnel administration

> The mutuality of training as a benefit to both organization *and* the individual is a dominant theme of modern views of training which see it as a process aimed at changing behavior. The desired "new" behavior must be considered valuable to both the organization and the individual.[4]

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A more recent article by Sylvia and Meier illustrates the extent to which the broader purposes of training have become universal in public management. They note that training is commonly believed to enhance

worker job satisfaction and morale, in addition to enhancing the quality and quantity of worker output.[5] Of course, not all types of training can or will contribute to every conceivable purpose. Some training is likely to contribute to worker productivity without enhancing employee satisfaction and morale, and vice versa.

The day-to-day management of public agencies may tend to be less than keenly observant of the potential disparity between the very real organizational needs for training and its potential for serving broader purposes. The equally real needs of individuals, especially, may be overlooked. The "organizational needs" to be fulfilled from training are generally those catered to by the attitudes and actions of managers and supervisors, who may have their own priorities. Sylvia notes that "skills training for managers and supervisors receives a greater emphasis in government agencies than does the training of rank-and-file employees."[6]

Thus there is a very real potential for public organization decision makers to overlook the personal needs and priorities of rank and file employees when designing training policies. Klingner succinctly asserts that:

> *Employees* view [training] as a reward for high performance, a break from routine job duties, or a means of learning skills that will hasten a move to a more desirable position. *Managers* view it as a means of improving work unit productivity by increasing output or reducing costs.[7]

Nigro and Nigro add that:
> Unfortunately, too often administrators and trainers decide on training needs without bothering to consult with employees. Management assumes that what it believes is logical and relevant will be so perceived by the trainees.[8]

If we accept these analyses of the varying perspectives of managers and employees toward training, a potential may exist for significant disagreements between the two groups about training policies. For an agency's training efforts to be optimally effective they should (arguably) both meet the employer's organizational needs and match the perceived needs of employees. Should the training offerings of an employer vary significantly from the preferences of employees, the best training can be a waste of time and money. While there are many reasons why the training priorities of organizations (i.e., of management) and their employees may become mismatched, in theory a middle ground exists which may maximize the better interests of both parties.

How accurate is Klingner's assessment of the views of employees and managers toward training? Klingner and others advocate the use of sur-

veys to ascertain employee interest in training offerings.[9] Yet little is known about how the views of the two groups differ. This article compares and analyzes the perspectives on training of local government supervisory personnel with those of line employees. The study is intended to demonstrate: (1) the potential utility of surveying to determine the training priorities of employees and supervisors; and (2) the significant differences found between the priorities of the two groups in a local government in California. The analysis is based on a pair of surveys administered to clerical employees and their supervisors in Santa Clara County Government in California. Results of the two surveys suggests that, surprisingly, supervisors placed a higher emphasis on training not directly linked to employees productivity, such as "human development training", than did employees, who tended to favor training in specific technical areas.

Methodology and Respondent Profile

A written survey was distributed to all clerical employees and their supervisors in Santa Clara County; a total of 1,091 (of approximately 3,000 total) employees and 132 (of approximately 300 total) supervisors completed the survey. The survey instruments were worded such that both the instrument for employees and that for supervisors queried respondents concerning their views on training offerings for employees. Note that the survey respondents were self-selected and the samples may or may not be inter representative of all clerical employees and their supervisors. Arguable, the respondents in both surveys may be those most interested in training issues.

Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the supervisors and the employees who responded to the respective survey. The two groups are quite similar in many ways, suggesting that the two samples were well matched, Both the supervisor (94%) and the employee (90%) respondents were mostly women. A majority of both groups were white, including 55% of the employees and a larger proportion (78%) of the supervisors. A significant number of both groups were Hispanic. Generally, the supervisors had more experience with the County; over 70% had worked for the County for more than seven years, compared to only 41% of the employees. Most of the supervisors had little or no college education; the educational background of employees was not obtained in the survey. According to sources at the County, few clerical employees have college experience or degrees.

With respect to job title area, the largest group represented among both supervisors and employees was General Clerical; 60% of the supervisor and 50% of the employee respondents worked in this area. A good deal of similarity between the two samples is found in other job title areas as

Table 1:

Comparison of Respondent Characteristics, Clerical Employees and Supervisor Survey Samples

N = 1032 clerical employees, 132 supervisors)
*denotes significant difference (p .05) between groups

GENDER

	Employees	Supervisors
Female	90%	94%
Male	10%	6%
	100	100

EXPERIENCE WITH COUNTY

	Employees	Supervisors
0-2 years	23%	10%*
3-7 years	36%	8%*
7+ years	41%	81%*
	100	100

JOB TITLE AREA

	Employees	Supervisors
Courts	7%	8%*
Medical	10%	9%*
Legal	5%	5%*
Financial	13%	8%
Secretarial	11%	3%
General Clerical	50%	57%
Misc. Specialized	4%	5%
	100	100

RACE

	Employees	Supervisors
Hispanic	21%	15%
White	55%	78%*
Black	5%	3%*
Asian	6%	1%*
Filipino	5%	1%*
Other, N/A	9%	2%*
	100	100

DEPARTMENT

	Employees	Supervisors
General Services	5%	3%
Social Services	14%	20%
Courts	17%	17%
Finance	8%	7%
Personnel	4%	7%
Transportation	7%	3%
Public Services	10%	12%
Health	17%	18%
Executive	5%	2%
Sheriff	4%	5%
Other/Misc.	9%	6%
	100	100

Table 2:

Priorities of Employees and Supervisors Among Specific Training Topics for Employees

(N=1032 clerical employees, 132 supervisors)
Columns do not add to 100% because respondents could choose an unlimited number of training topics.
*denotes significant difference (p .05) between groups

TECHNICAL SKILLS

	Employees	Supervisors
Beginning Computers	59%	51%
Word Processing	58%	56%
Supervisory Skills	50%	38%*
Business writing	43%	53%*
Legal Offices/1	41%	22%*
Advanced Computers	39%	31%
General Offices/1	37%	57%*
Accounting	32%	10%*
Basic Bookkeeping	28%	7%*
Medical Offices/1	27%	12%*
Advanced typing	26%	18%*
Telephone techniques	15%	73%*
Shorthand	26%	5%*
Beginning typing	8%	7%*
Filing	5%	22%*
(1/ denotes office terminology/procedures)		

PERSONNEL SYSTEM

	Employees	Supervisors
How to prepare for exams	60%	75%*
County Career Opportunities	56%	67%*
How to prepare for interviews	52%	65%*
How to apply for promotions	49%	50%
How to deal with rejections	30%	47%*

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT/INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

	Employees	Supervisors
Managing office stress	56%	82%*
Communication skills	52%	70%*
Assertiveness	46%	41%*
Worker/supvsor. relations	44%	60%*
Interacting with the public	37%	71%*
Time Management	35%	68%*

well. The respondents of both samples were spread evenly among the various County departments; the Departments of Health and Social Services and the Courts accounted for the majority of both groups.

Training Priorities Compared

Table 2 illustrates the strong overall support for training among both clerical employees and supervisors. Surprisingly, clerical supervisors were somewhat more supportive of a larger variety of training topics. Of the 26 specific types of training given to respondents as potential offerings, sixteen were listed by a majority of clerical supervisors as desirable for their employees. By contrast, only eight training topics were of interest to a majority of the clerical employees. This finding apparently demonstrates the commitment of responding supervisors to the idea of the importance of providing training for employees, but also suggests that supervisors perceive a good deal of need for training among their employees.

Table 3: Priorities of Employees and Supervisors Among General Training Areas for Employees

(N = 1032 clerical employees, 132 supervisors)
*denotes significant difference (p .05) between groups

"Given the limited time for training, which general type of training is most important to you?"

	Employees	Supervisors
Technical Skills	58%	41%*
Interpersonal Skills	19%	56%
Personnel System	23%	3%*
	100	100

The single most remarkable difference between the priorities for training indicated by supervisors and those of their employees lies in the area of general training topics. Whereas Table 3 indicates that most (56%) supervisors placed a premium on training in the general area of interpersonal skills, employees tended to be much more interested in the area of technical skills, with 58% of employee respondents indicating such a preference. This difference would seem to support the contention that supervisors are quite sensitive to or are concerned with the interpersonal aspects of the workplace. They would rather enhance the human development of their subordinates than promote the employees' training in specific technical skills. The preference indicated by supervisors for training in interpersonal skills may also reflect priorities gained from the supervisors' own training experience in this area, as Santa Clara County has in recent years had a strong commitment to this type of training. Clerical supervisors may

wish that their employees could share in the benefits they have gained from such training.

There are also notable differences among the two groups' preferences in specific training topics. For example, clerical supervisors as a group were much more concerned with topics that pertain to interaction with the world beyond the office: over seventy percent of the supervisors indicated an interest in training for their employees in the areas of "Telephone Techniques" and "Interacting with the Public". Relatively few employees indicated an interest in these topics. Managers seemed more concerned with the organization's interaction with its environment, knowing that this relationship can be instrumental to public support and cooperation. Employees are more content with their present skills in this area.

For their part, employees indicated relatively more interest than their supervisory counterparts in the areas of "Supervisory Skills" and computers. Employees may perceive these topics as pathways to desired promotions. They were also more interested in building basic clerical skills like shorthand, bookkeeping, and accounting, although a minority of employees (and supervisors) indicated this interest.

The priorities of the two groups converge in many specific training topics. Among the types of training for which a majority of both employees and supervisors indicated preference were: computers, word processing, exam preparation, career opportunities, interviewing skills, office stress management, and communication skills. Low or negligible support was indicated by both groups for basic skills like beginning typing and filing.

Discussion

Local governments typically face severe constraints in the amount of resources which can be devoted to training activities. This analysis has demonstrated the potential value of surveying personnel as a means of ascertaining the varying priorities of workers and supervisors. The results of the survey references here suggest that such priorities may be at least partially at odds.

Specifically, in this instance supervisors were much more concerned with "human development skills" for their employees. Such training does not directly affect the productivity of employees, yet supervisors seemed to attach great value on enhancing the interpersonal interaction and individual well-being of their employees. This finding runs counter to the contention that management conceives of training soley as a productivity booster.

Employees, however, did demonstrate that their priority in training is to enhance the value of their labor through the acquisition of specific technical skills. They expressed a clear preference for such training over both human development and interpersonal skills topics.

Notes

[1] F. Nigro and L. Nigro, *The New Public Personnel Administration*, (Itsaca, IL:F.E. Peacock, 1976), 230.

[2] R. Sylvia, "An Organizational Perspective on Training and Development in the Public Sector," in S. Hays and R. Kearney, eds., *Public Personnel Administration: Problems and Prospects*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1983), 137-152.

[3] Nigro and Nigro, op.cit., p. 229.

[4] Ibid., p. 230

[5] R. Sylvia and K.C. Meier, "An Organizational Perspective on Training and Development in the Public Sector," in S. Hays and R. Kearney, eds., *Public Personnel Administration: Problems and Prospects*, 2nd Ed., (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, forthcoming).

[6] Sylvia, op.cit., p. 142.

[7] D. Klingner, *Public Personnel Management: Contexts and Strategies*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall), 244.

[8] Nigro and Nigro, op.cit., p. 232.

[9] Klingner, op.cit., p. 249.

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