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Some Forest Industry Thoughts on the Training of First-Line Supervisors

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INTRODUCTION

During the spring of 1977, a proposal (which had received favourable interest from the Departments of Labour and Manpower personnel of two provincial governments) for the development of a logger training school for supervisors was presented to FERIC by a member company.

The company submitting the proposal stated that based on FERIC Technical Report No. TR-11 "Survey of Logger Training", it was believed that a national concern has emerged within the industry about the status and the adequacy of current and planned training programs and approaches. The proposal supported the well established fact that first-line supervisors were one of the most important links in the production chain and recommended that training courses be developed, and that centralized training centres might be supported by the industry. It was proposed that FERIC carry on a further investigation to determine the need and support for supervisory training by surveying selected Canadian companies.

The survey team was made up of Wayne Novak, FERIC; Richard Corey, Department of Labour and Manpower, Forest Training Unit, New Brunswick and Tom Crozier, Council of Forest Industries of British Columbia (COFI), British Columbia. Grateful appreciation is extended to them, their employers, and to the companies and colleges participating in the survey.

OBJECTIVES:

The survey team met in June 1977 and established the following objectives:

To determine:

- 1) Whether or not there is a need for more or better supervisor training.
- 2) What skills supervisors need to acquire to be more effective.
- 3) If the industry would support central or regional supervisor training schools.

A secondary objective was to stimulate thinking in the area of supervisory training.

Apart from these specific objectives, FERIC was also trying to identify its role, if any, in the training field. It was anticipated that the personnel to be interviewed would be able to make knowledgeable recommendations based on their personal, company and industry experience, and that from this would emerge the type of program which would best fulfill industry needs.

THE FIRST-LINE SUPERVISOR — "THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE"

Before the type of training required can be discussed, it is necessary to define the place of the first line supervisor within the organization structure. This is not a simple task, as, at the present time, his role varies significantly from organization to organization.

The first line supervisors' position is well described in the work of T.W. Bonham.

"The first-line supervisor occupies a very important position in the business organization. ... this position is unique in that it is situated on the lowest rung of the managerial ladder. He communicates downward to the rank-and-file and upward to management. In serving as the crucial link between management and worker philosophy, if the two philosophies are in conflict, he must attempt to reconcile them. Furthermore, it is his responsibility to put management's theories into practice since the best plans are worthless unless they are correctly implemented." [1].

As such, he functions as a message centre, a catalytic agent, a group consultant, a liaison agent, and a leader.

The first-line supervisors' problem is not a new phenomenon, but it has been getting more demanding with the increased complexity of company organizations, government regulations and labour agreements.

SURVEY ORGANIZATION AND PROCEDURE:

It was decided not to depend on a mailed questionnaire survey format because input was desired from different management levels of the industry. The approach chosen was to visit six selected companies, each in a different region of Canada. Where possible, separate discussions were organized with three levels of management. To keep a common survey base, the meetings started by asking a series of standard questions, but it was expected that the most valuable information would come from the informal discussions which would follow.

The six cooperating companies were not chosen to represent a cross section of the industry. They were selected for the following characteristics:

- a major employer and producer, each in a different region of Canada.
- having had past training commitments and likely to have knowledge of the efforts and experience of other forest companies in their region.

On site visits were made by the survey team in July 1977. In order to get a broader perspective, all levels of woodlands management personnel were interviewed, from first-line supervisors to woodlands managers. These included six senior management, twenty mid-management and twelve first-line supervisory personnel. The survey team tried to interview each level individually, in order to minimize the pressures on each level and to receive an uninhibited response from each.

It was not always possible to accomplish separate meetings with the various levels of management, so the survey suffers to some extent because in meetings with more than one level of supervision the opinions of the senior level naturally dominated and became the consensus of the group.

FINDINGS:

These findings reflect the opinions of those interviewed and are not to be considered an industry consensus.

1) A Role for More or Better Training?

It was apparent during the interviews that all companies were becoming increasingly aware of the importance of the "MAN" in the efficiency of their operations. However most companies were not sure how best to tap this potential.

Much has been heard of preventive maintenance of machines to ensure their trouble-free operation. Today, more emphasis is also being placed on action to increase employee job satisfaction, which results in improved work quality and production. Companies are trying to stimulate a new "esprit de corps" among employees, making each feel part of an important group whose help and advice is needed and is being sought.

All companies had prior experience with training. This was usually aimed at the operator level. They were aware of training assistance and courses available to them locally but often were not satisfied with the course appropriateness and felt forced to look further afield. Where to look was the problem. The desirability of having a resource centre which maintains information on courses, course material, cost and effectiveness was mentioned at more than one company.

2) Selection and Training of Supervisors

Selection and training were investigated because they are the major areas available to an organization for improving the ability and skill level of the work force. Even though the objectives of selection and training are the same, it is very difficult to achieve a highly skilled work force without involving both. The effectiveness of future supervisory training starts from having a good candidate selection process.

2.1 Selection of Supervisors:

The chief criteria used in the selection of first-line supervisors were; job experience, leadership ability, competence and attitude. Lesser significance was given to the level of education, promotability potential, specialized skill areas and management ability.

All companies surveyed depended to a large extent on their selection process. They felt that the qualifications outlined above could best be evaluated by an interview committee. Trying the man for a probationary period was the final step and the real deciding factor. There was some difference in the method employed; varying from using the "sink or swim" approach to placing the man with a competent supervisor to get started.

None of the companies used selection aids such as attitude, aptitude, or other psychological or written tests. There was considerable controversy as to the value of selection aids in screening out those who would not be happy in the outdoors, even though potentially capable. Furthermore, these aids often ignore environmental factors. However, two companies saw the possible benefits as follows:

"In the process of screening candidates our industry should be able to provide standard guidelines to determine the strengths and weaknesses of candidates. This tool could locate the weak areas at an early date and follow up with proper training."

"No matter how good our industry's selection process is, there still exist tools that could increase our success rate."

Only one company hired technical college graduates and placed them directly into a supervisory position. The remaining five felt that the individual would have to prove himself by gaining experience in some other part of the organization, or by having gained supervisory experience at another company.

2.2 Training of Supervisors:

Training seeks to achieve a specific objective by increasing the ability levels of the existing work force. There are two basic questions that should precede training:

What skills can be taught and to which people?

How can these skills be taught?

2.2.1 Skill Areas:

It became clear that identifying the areas in which training is required is very difficult. The areas which companies were emphasizing included human relations, leadership qualities, union contracts, cost

control and budgeting. It was mentioned that individuals had difficulty in judging themselves or others because they had no bench marks for comparison. Before testing his performance, it is first necessary to have a clear definition of an individuals areas of responsibility. Specifying skills is not an easy task. However, it is recognized that there are tools available today which have been found very useful. The most popular of these is the DACUM (Developing a Curriculum) approach:

"This system uses a skill profile listing in sequence all the tasks of that skill that an individual must be able to perform in order to be proficient in a particular vocation. The DACUM approach emphasizes skill performance rather than knowledge. The DACUM system is used to monitor and evaluate the trainees' progress on a regular basis. With a performance oriented evaluation, it is easier to note the need for upgrading special skills training, or other work related problems that may crop up on the job" [4]

This DACUM approach has recently been used by three cooperating forest companies in the Atlantic region. They have completed a "DACUM" for "forestry supervisors" involving the general skills required for the most common type of forest supervisor (including contractors). The next step is to break this down to suit specific company job descriptions. These companies are also working closely with the local Forest Technical school to develop a program to suit this skill profile.

Frequent references were made during the interviews to government programs. The following background information was obtained, and is included here as general information. The Federal Government took its first step toward an adequate training needs identification system with the establishment of the Manpower Needs Committees in each province.

In 1967, these committees concentrated their efforts mainly on technical matters relating specifically to job or skill training. Early in 1972, however, they saw their role and functions expanded to include all aspects of manpower policies and programs.

The committees are now responsible for the assessment of manpower training needs in each province and for making recommendations on training results. Included in the assessment are the needs of specific industrial sectors and special groups of adult workers.

To ensure that these needs are identified, the committees have also been asked to establish effective mechanisms for consultation with employees, professions, unions and public agencies. This is where the difficulties frequently arise. Although Needs Committees have generally been successful in coordinating government efforts, they have, on the

whole, fallen short in obtaining adequate employer and labour participation. This is not because industry has refused to participate in discussion with the government, but, more likely because these Committees and their role have largely been unknown. It may be that their consultative mechanisms are inadequate.

2.2.2 Course Design:

The companies are more concerned with the quality than with the quantity of training available for their supervisors. Therefore they react as follows to the original proposal, and with respect to the type of program that would best suit their needs.

They reject the idea of establishing a separate central school for first-line supervisors because:

- . Supervisory problems vary greatly from region to region, company to company and even within the same company. Answers to a great number of these problems must be found locally.
- . A program, if developed, must be close to the companies and must be modified to suit the individual region and company structure.
- . Companies believe they have the potential to handle in-house programs for the technical skills, but feel weak in the behavioural science areas.

FERIC's Technical Report No. 11, came to the following conclusions in talking about the problems of designing Training for loggers. The example is useful in keeping any type of industry wide training program in proper perspective:

"While desirable, standardization would be difficult to achieve on a Canada-wide basis. Regional differences in forest conditions and logging practices, provincial jurisdiction and training curricula and differences in logging practices between firms within the same region all limit the possibilities for standardizing logger training. Within a region, however, the chances for standardization are better, at least for the Core Topics. Local needs could still be considered by making adjustments to the basic course outline, and by supplementary instructions in the employing firm. For example, cut/skid training at one firm may include a major emphasis upon chainsaw service and repair. Another firm within the same region may reason that the operator need only to know how to service his saw, leaving the saw repairs to company mechanics. Neither procedure is necessarily superior; both firms would be teaching methods which are consistent with company logging practices." [5]

COMPANY OPINIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The great and real variation in the foreman's responsibilities and skill requirements was the major reason why all companies said that training of first-line supervisors must be tailor-made to their needs and that their personnel must be very much involved in structuring the course. However, they also recognized the place for outside help in developing courses for foremen training.

They felt that the quality of in-house training programs would be improved by:

- the availability of proper instructional material and facilities.
- more trained instructional personnel.
- better knowledge of new advances in instructional techniques and material.
- a central source of information about available programs.

Many of these areas can be improved but there was no clear agreement as to who should be involved. Company reaction has been to create a closer liaison between the industry and present educational institutions. Both agreed that even closer liaison would be mutually desirable and helpful.

The survey team made a point of visiting (where & when possible) existing educational institutions close to the companies interviewed. All colleges stated that they were willing to give courses in supervisory training, providing they knew better what industry required, and would support.

Among the company criticisms of past training programs were:

- Government Manpower involvement in the selection of candidates was based on the criteria that they were unemployed, without regard for their real interest and potential adaptability to their eventual employment. (The frustration from this experience seemed to trigger an automatic response from company management personnel:

"We don't feel we can leave it to Manpower to select, train and graduate our first-line supervisors.")
- Courses are not realistic enough; instructors are too theoretical and lack practical experience.

More cooperation has been noticed between training organizations, such as community colleges, and companies. Courses have been developed and are being developed for specific companies at company request. This cooperation developed in part because of the lack of training programs designed for woodlands personnel. The programs currently in use

(including parent company programs used company-wide) were designed more for industrial and office supervisors and were not related to the very different conditions which exist in the bush. Many have proven to be very costly, time consuming and of doubtful benefit to the company.

In the past little effort was made to involve all levels of management in a single training experience. This created a variation in management styles within organizations sometimes leading to conflict. Greater efforts have been made to involve all levels of management in recent training programs.

The first-line supervisors agreed that all levels of management should be involved, but this was not their main concern. While they are dissatisfied with the results of training in general, their main problem continues to be inadequate communication. They felt that the information transmitted downward often undergoes considerable dilution. It is not uncommon for a supervisor to learn of company plans or decisions from the union steward or from the company grapevine. This tends to downgrade the foreman's role both in his own eyes and in those of his men. It is also likely to cause a decline of motivation and performance:

"Most humans need some structure within their environment and feedback from their environment. Without structure and feedback the environment is perceived as ambiguous and as a source of stress and internal tension." [2]

Lack of communication places the foremen on the fringe of management.

Most supervisors had received some off-the-job training and appreciated the courses but felt let down if there was no follow-up and they were still left with their own communication, organizational and interpersonnel problems.

The discussions also touched on the problem of what FERIC could usefully do in the training field. Company opinion can be grouped under the following four responses:

1. "FERIC should not be involved in training. FERIC should be concentrating on the forest engineering problems because this is where FERIC's expertise lies."
2. "FERIC might have a role in helping existing companies and organizations with course material, and providing instructors."
3. "We so called "Managers" of woodlands either fail to recognize our problems or cannot face the fact that we have some. Perhaps FERIC's role is to expose these needs."

4. "FERIC should become the central information centre and should document, on an on-going basis, training programs which are available, and report on their results and costs where they have been tried."

CONCLUSIONS:

There is an industry awareness of the need for better training of first-line supervisors and an acceptance that their selection and training is an essential responsibility of local management. All companies recognize the importance first-line supervisory levels have on their logging efficiency and cost. They believe that the development of these people justifies more attention than it has received in the past.

It was strongly felt that to be effective, any training program must include input from company personnel who know their particular organization, problems and needs. This reaction was based on disappointing experiences with Manpower and company-wide programs designed and run by non-company and non-woodlands personnel.

The first-line supervisors saw their greatest problem to be one of communication rather than a need for further training. Though communication courses can be incorporated into a training program, it was felt that more company meetings could best help bridge this communication gap.

The personnel directly involved with the development of a supervisory training program said they had problems with identifying what should be covered. The DACUM approach being used by three companies in the Maritimes could be helpful in this area. This program has the advantage of identifying foreman skill requirements and proficiency in each area before the course begins. This method minimizes boredom from repetition of material already well known and also provides the supervisor, his superiors and the trainer with a reference against which his performance can be evaluated as the course progresses and also later when he is on the job.

It was felt that the problems associated with training of first-line supervisors would not be solved by a new and independent training school. Existing forest technician, ranger schools and community colleges, with their teaching staff and facilities, if properly used, could provide this service.

The establishment of a training information centre that would maintain a current library on all training materials and program descriptions, to aid in the formulation of individual company training programs, would be beneficial.

Action initiated by individual companies at this time is more likely to be communicated through existing industry training committees and inter-company channels rather than by an "outside the company" agency such as FERIC.

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