

Industrial Language Training

"A Real Eye-Opener"

An Account of a Course in Communications for Supervisors

by

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The Industrial Language Training Service is funded by the Government to provide communications training for ethnic minority workers in industry. However, many companies realise that communication difficulties arise between groups and individuals and that the problem has to be tackled from both ends. Here is an account of how one company responded to the need for English supervisor training in a section of the company which employed a large number of ethnic minority workers.

As well as the informal contact with supervisors during an Industrial Language Training project, which is a form of training in itself (see *"Don't stop now for goodness sake"* in *The Training Officer*, June, 1978), the service also offers courses of more formal training for supervisors, which vary in length and design according to the needs of the company concerned.

In this case the company and the Industrial Language Unit decided on a course of 12 hours, divided into four 3-hour sessions. This was somewhat shorter than the time the Unit would have preferred but it was essential that the course be completed before the start of the company's busy summer work period.

Logistics

"If you can fit in this course with our roster system, you deserve a medal".

This comment, made by a senior supervisor, indicates the difficulties of getting any group of people together for training where a complicated shift system exists — and especially a group of supervisors.

In the event a combination of flexible timing, the co-

operation of a well-organised shift manager and the goodwill of the participants overcame the logistical problems set by the roster. With one or two exceptions, the entire supervisory staff of the section concerned, plus members of management and the training department (33 people in all) were involved in the training and over two thirds of these managed to attend at least three out of the four sessions.

Course Design

"It's difficult to get to know people on this job. Sometimes I think it's not worth the effort".

This comment and others like it, made by the supervisors in individual interviews with them before training began, formed the basis for course design. They revealed the difficulties of managing a workforce which, on occasion, they could not get through to or understand.

"Sometimes you know something's happened but they won't tell you what it is — so and so won't work with so and so, but he won't tell you why. So what can I do about it?"

Sometimes the problems would be there because of the job itself. Complicated shift systems which meant that you could be managing a different gang of workers each shift, *would* make it difficult to get to know people. However, there could be other factors involved like not being able to communicate with people because of difficulties of understanding and not having enough points of common knowledge and interest to talk about. Finally, you might not *like* the people you had to work with but it would be difficult to make a fair judgement if you couldn't talk to them and your relationship was based on stereotypes, *eg All Indians are sullen*. If these factors were present they had to be seen and treated separately for the situation to improve.

Industrial Language Training

DIAGRAM 1

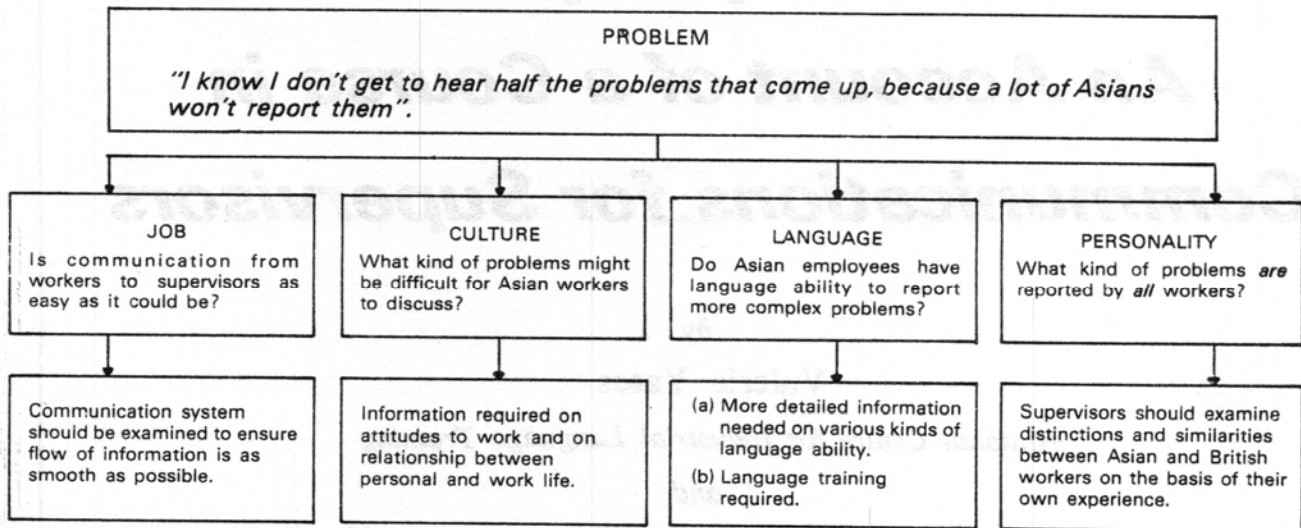


Diagram 1 shows how a problem might be analysed and lead to action.

changes in practice and procedures in the job, to improve communication in general within the section.

Company Objectives

During meetings with management and the training department, a number of objectives for the course were suggested. These ranged from the general:

"I just want people in the section to have a bit more interest in their work".

to the specific:

"It would be useful to know exactly who is supposed to pray when".

and from the pessimistic:

"You'll be lucky if you get some of them to change their opinions".

to the optimistic:

"It would be useful if you could teach them some Indian language".

In the event, three broad objectives were established:

- 1 to raise awareness of the linguistic and behavioural problems experienced by Asian workers;**
- 2 to give advice and skills to supervisors to assist them in overcoming communication problems that arise at work;**
- 3 to provide supervisory staff, where appropriate, with information about the cultural background of the operatives in their section.**

A fourth subsidiary objective was agreed before the start of the course. This was that the trainees should be encouraged throughout the course to use the sessions as a vehicle for discussing problems and suggesting

The Method of Instruction

Rather than concentrate on one objective in each session it was decided to approach all three main objectives within each session and attempt to follow the three strands throughout the whole course. By doing this the trainers felt that it would demonstrate the interdependence of increased knowledge, greater awareness and the supervisor's skills in dealing with workers.

The method of instruction relied very much on getting the supervisors to look at their own language and culture and the assumptions they made, often quite unconsciously, which are based on these. The way someone speaks, the accent they use, and the choice of words can tell you a lot about them. Similarly, an English name like 'Nigel Fortescue-Smyth' conjures up a whole background for that person, which an Indian name like 'Jaswinder Singh Sidhu' cannot do, unless you find out what lies behind it, in terms of upbringing, status in society, religion and relationship with others.

Exercises, games and role-plays were devised to give the supervisors the *experience* of the complexities of language and culture and by extension the difficulties an ethnic minority worker might have in dealing with them appropriately. Some of the behaviour they had previously witnessed in their workers and not understood could now be explained.

Pure information giving was not considered to be the most crucial part of the course since unless it were seen to be relevant, there was a strong chance it would fall on deaf ears. The aim was therefore to create a *demand* for information and this often arose as a result of an exercise in the training room and the discussions which followed.

Industrial Language Training

DIAGRAM 2

	INFORMATION ON CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS	RAISING AWARENESS OF LANGUAGE & BEHAVIOURAL DIFFERENCES	GIVING SKILLS AND ADVICE ON SHOP-FLOOR PROBLEMS
WEEK ONE	Naming systems; getting information from a name.	Stereotypes based on names; tape exercise on the different uses of English; subtleties of humour; accent; dialect; jargon.	The role of the supervisor; the problems of supervision in other industries; the experience of change.
WEEK TWO	Languages of the Indian Subcontinent; comparison of Indian and European languages; maps of main areas of immigration.	Learning a foreign language; learning words in context; exercises in reading and listening to a foreign language; making sense of instructions.	Film: <i>'Singh 171'</i> plus exercise on different approaches to problems; using interpreters.
WEEK THREE	Linking names and languages to religion and culture; restrictions of diet; attitudes towards work, friends and family.	Common problems of second language learners, interpreting gesture, facial expression and body language; interpreting status, class and relationship in speech.	Dealing with garbled explanations; structuring instructions; simplifying language; dealing with stressful situations.
WEEK FOUR	Reasons for immigration; local patterns of settlement; some adjustments and changes; employment patterns; Asian views of English people.	Language under stress; problems of fluent speakers; interpreting stress and intonation; prejudice based on stereotypes; effects of discrimination.	Interviewing second language speakers about work problems; confronting decisions based on stereotypes.

The brief outline of the course shown in Diagram 2 gives an impression of how the objectives were pursued throughout the sessions.

Evaluation

Towards the end of the course, supervisors were asked to apply their existing skills, together with any new information and attitudes they had acquired to some of the problems they had raised before the course began.

The encouraging results of these exercises and the comments made during a post course evaluation organised by the Company indicated the extent of the success of the training.

There was no doubt that the sessions had been enjoyable. The view of a member of the training department:

"It was good to hear laughter coming from the training room, because I know if people are enjoying themselves, they are learning something".

was echoed by the participants:

"I must admit I was a bit suspicious at first, but I looked forward to the sessions after a while".

On a more serious level, it was equally certain that people had learnt something from the exercise:

"I think it's given me a much better understanding of the problems these people have, especially the difficulties with language".

and had begun to demolish stereotypes:

"It's funny really, knowing more about their religions and things makes them seem more like individuals somehow".

What Next?

The Company is now considering some of the suggestions put forward by the supervisors at the end of the course. These ranged from a request for similar training for mixed groups of English and ethnic minority workers from the shop floor to a better induction onto the job for everybody. Many saw the need for communications training in the section, not only for *"the small number you just can't get through to"* but also for people who with more confidence in speaking and better reading and writing skills might be eligible for supervisory posts.

These views seem to bear out the title of this article. The course had been *"a real eye-opener"* for a lot of the participants and had led to a reappraisal of their situation and constructive suggestions as to how it might be improved.