

# Designing Personal Growth Laboratory as an In-house Intervention: Preparing Managers for the Changing Environment

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# Designing Personal Growth Laboratory as an In-house Intervention: Preparing Managers for the Changing Environment

Uma Jain

## **BACKDROP**

Sensitivity training/T group methodology has been widely found to have a great potential for individual, group and organisation development. However, there have also been several doubts and questions about using this methodology in an in-house organizational setting. This paper presents the process and outcome of using Personal Growth Laboratory as an intervention in an organization to prepare managers for organizational change. The paper presents a design for using the laboratory method with a combination of various learning spaces for exploration to make the laboratory method more suitable to the requirements as well as the constraints in an in-house setting. While the focus in this paper is the intervention in one organisation where the intervention was done recently to prepare young executives (identified high fliers) for the future, the design has been used and refined in work with several organizations earlier. Based on the learnings from all these experiences, the paper also discusses the style and competencies of the trainer and the other requirements for the design to be effective.

## **INITIATING THE INTERVENTION**

The author was contacted by the client organization to conduct a personal growth laboratory for their executives. As the discussions with the HR people proceeded, it emerged that the organization wanted to use these laboratories as an OD intervention to develop the required skills and competencies in their managers to become more effective in a fast-changing environment.

This organization is almost 100 years old and has very well defined systems, which have worked well to create a reliable service record. However, the organization has been operating in a monopoly situation in its region of operation, with no competitors for its services and has charged higher prices as compared to other organizations in the field. With the change in scenario under Globalisation, the organization felt the need for change in culture to deal with the likely competition. The organisation has also realised that it will need to be more responsive and flexible to retain its position in the market as well as enter new areas/regions in the changed scenario. In the light of this, the HRD department of the organization had envisaged this intervention to prepare the young executives who will be managers of tomorrow and develop them in the desired directions.

It was identified through several rounds of discussions that for preparing to deal with the future, the managers will need more readiness and responsiveness to change, flexibility, teamwork, cost consciousness, leadership skills and values conducive for excellence, quality and customer responsiveness. To enhance these, it was felt that personal growth work in a laboratory setting will be a relevant intervention.

The client organization chose the laboratory method but expressed some other special requirements. They also shared their experience of doing some similar workshops earlier in which mainly structured sessions and instruments were used but they felt that the depth of exploration was not adequate and they wanted deeper exploration. They also wanted a report based on the data generated in the workshop about the group/organizational issues as well as the strengths, areas of improvement and developmental action plan for each participant. Underlying all this there also seemed to be an intention to use the intervention to identify the potential of people for future leadership. The author as a consultant had some value concerns about this. They were discussed with the client and a process was designed (described later in the section on individual facilitation sessions) to take care of the need while also following the professional values and ethics.

### **COMMON CONCERNS ABOUT IN-HOUSE LABORATORIES**

The common issues raised about laboratories in an in-house setting are:

1. Whether people will open up in a cousin lab and whether it is safe to conduct labs for cousin groups. There is an apprehension that either people will not open up adequately so as to reach the required depth of exploration, or if they really open up it may affect their relationships or the data may be used to the detriment of the individuals.
2. It has also been often felt that the open-endedness, absence of conclusion and concrete action plans in a laboratory may not result in desired change.
3. Sometimes it is also mentioned that the participants become so sensitive to feelings that they lose the task focus. This also raises questions about the benefits of the laboratory method from the organisation's point of view.
4. Some participants may get negatively impacted by the feedback they receive in the laboratory process, leading to emotional disturbance.
5. Participants may develop dependency on the facilitators and also expect similar behaviour from their seniors/managers.

### **The Design**

Based on the needs expressed and keeping the professional values, ethics and excellence in focus, the following plan was proposed:

1. Personal Effectiveness laboratory (4 days)
2. Individual consultation and Review Sessions (2 days)
3. Overall Report and action plans for further development
4. A study of the changes in behaviour and planning further work to support the desired change.

The organisation agreed on the first three stages. The people selected were high performers amongst the young executives to start with (as per the performance evaluation system of the company), though the company intends to offer this opportunity to others later. The design for this intervention was made so to take care of the above concerns about in-house laboratories.

While using the process-based learning, an attempt was made to also make it organizationally relevant. A broad schedule is given in the annexure I.

## **HIGHLIGHTS OF THE INTERVENTION**

### **Agreed Program Objectives**

- To develop a greater understanding of oneself, one's interpersonal and group relationships.
- Identify strengths and areas of improvements
- Break through the barriers and unfold leadership potential
- Understand other people, appreciate diversity and develop collaborative relationships
- Clarify one's values and their impact on managerial and leadership role
- Develop greater understanding of group processes for playing a facilitative role in teams.
- Develop more trusting, open and collaborative style of working with individuals and teams
- Enhance customer and change-responsiveness
- Develop an attitude of continuous learning and build learning as a value

### **Methodology**

The laboratory was planned to be conducted primarily through an experiential and participative methodology with a mix of unstructured T-group sessions, semi-structured exercises, simulations, self-assessment inventories and conceptual inputs. Processes of reflecting, sharing, experimenting and conceptualizing were to be used in a highly participative setting where participants are encouraged to share and listen, confront and support each other in an in-depth exploration of beliefs, values and attitudes. The was to encourage the participants to be a keen observer of the processes to enhance the ability to be aware of self, others and the whole group and focus on making a better future rather than validating the past..

### **The Instruments to be Used:**

1. Personal Effectiveness Inventory
2. Schulz Measures (Element B)
3. Myers Briggs Type Indicator
4. Group Roles Nominations Form

### **Simulations/ Exercises Planned:**

1. Nasa (For understanding group processes and behaviour in groups)
2. Win as much as you can (Conflict and Collaboration)
3. Values checklist and Value Auction (clarifying values).

### **Unstructured Group Sessions**

An important element of the learning events were the unstructured group sessions on each day in which the participants had an opportunity to see their own behaviour in a group situation, get

feedback from others and experiment with the desired new behaviour.

### **The Laboratory as it Happened**

The laboratory conducted adhered to the objectives and methodology as planned. Fourteen executives/managers participated. All the areas of work envisaged in the tentative schedule prepared before the programme were covered though there were some adjustments made in the schedule when some sessions took longer than planned e.g. on the second day, the group felt that they needed to work more in small groups on the personality types later in the evening and present it the next day and we had one more unstructured session instead. As a result, the Nasa exercise next day started after the presentations and we did the conflict and collaboration exercise on the last day. The programme ended at 6.30 pm instead of 4.30 pm as was planned on the last day. It was decided to have an unstructured session on the last day also which was not in the schedule instead of the open session (as in each session more people were opening up and exploring issues) and it did provide opportunity to some more members of the group to explore themselves. The kinds of themes mentioned in the schedule for the unstructured group work were not necessarily monitored consciously by the facilitator. However, the group did explore all of those in the process of its growth. We also had more extended sessions than planned on some of the days.

### **The Laboratory Process**

- There was a mix of structured and unstructured sessions so that people can find a way to open up and start exploring.
- Unstructured sessions (T-Group) were facilitated with the focus on 'here and now' rather than back home problems or relationships so that people do not get caught into history of their earlier interactions and relationships whether pleasant or unpleasant and the group works together. Sinha (1986) brought out in his research study that greater emphasis on personal growth and lesser emphasis on work relationship and problems in the initial stages of T-Group activities will result in greater learning outcomes in a family lab group.
- There was a predominance of interventions in which the group members were encouraged to interact with each other and explore the processes at self, interpersonal and group level. Trainer style was supportive but focused on the objectives of learning and not highly nurturing or relationship-oriented. A nurturing relationship-oriented style builds faster rapport and lot of openness on personal issues but also builds dependency on the trainer and does not build group learning and support. Also, the nature of learning in such laboratories is different and may not get easily applied to the work situation. In author's view, by and large this is not functional for an in-house setting and can sometimes have dysfunctional consequences e.g. the executives building the expectations of such behaviour from their seniors in the organization who are not ready for it and whose style and preferences are different.
- At the end of each day, a short feedback was taken which brings out the feelings as well as opinions of the participants about the day. Participants have the choice whether to mention their names or not. It helps in designing the next day's schedule. This is analysed and fed back to the participants in the morning without mentioning any names.

This process facilitates group building and making participants aware of and take more responsibility for the processes in the group.

- Participants were encouraged to form groups with new members for different exercises and also the size of the group was different for different activities, which provided scope for various types of people to use the spaces according to their preference and open up for learning.
- Participants were taken out of their normal work setting to an off site location and were asked not to the use of mobile phones during sessions. There was arrangement to take any messages for them. This was taken care of by the HR department of the company.
- Support groups were formed after the programme based on their preferences as well as feasibility of meeting so that they can help and support each other in further explorations and strengthening of the Learnings. Sinha's (1986) research also suggested that follow-up efforts after T-Groups are conducive to learning and the impact of T-Group withers with the passage of time unless reinforcement is provided through organized efforts.

### **Individual Facilitation Sessions**

The laboratory was followed by individual facilitation sessions (this title was given by the client). The sessions acted as a time to go deeper and consolidate the learnings from the programme at the self level so that there can be a closure at individual level and action plans drawn up for further development. This was also done to involve the people in the analysis as well as developing the action plan. It was felt that it is not appropriate for the consultant to give any feedback to the client organisation without knowledge and participation of the participants. Therefore, the action plan was drawn up in these sessions. Prior to the session, the participants were asked to reflect on their experience and learning in the laboratory and fill up a form for self-development plan (Annexure II). After the explorations in the session with the participant, s/he was asked to re-work the draft and send it to the consultant. In this process an attempt was made that as far as possible, there is an agreement between the participant's understanding and the final document.

### **OVERALL PATTERNS AND DEVELOPMENT PLANS.**

Client was also given a report which had two aspects: the analysis of common patterns in the group identified from the data of the various learning events with a view to understand the areas of further development and change in the organisation and the action plan for each individual. A presentation was made to senior people in HR based on the report.

Some of the certain general patterns and issues are given below:

#### **1. Strengths**

Right in the beginning when asked about their strengths, most people mentioned areas of hard work and various aspects of technical/functional expertise as their strength.

## 2. Areas of Improvements

The common areas of Development were mainly in behavioural aspects viz. communication, interpersonal relationship skills, dealing with people, leadership skills, dealing with subordinates. While these were identified by the participants themselves, the laboratory data confirms the trend and the various activities in the programme gave an in-depth and specific understanding of these, the causes for the weaknesses and pathways for improvement for the individuals.

The main strength areas for a good majority of people came out in the laboratory as technical/job knowledge, regularity, reliability, planning, organizing, systematic, analytical, hard work, sincerity of purpose, persistence, being firm and focused etc.

Weaknesses perhaps resulting from a high emphasis on this style of functioning were:

- Less patience to listen to others
- Dominating/controlling the proceedings/ preference for Independent working
- Jumping to conclusions without adequate diagnosis
- Impatience/Rigidity/ judgmental behaviour
- Insensitivity to others' feelings
- Difficulty in changing set schedule/dealing with ambiguous/unstructured situations/ Work contingencies/Need for involving people to fulfill project requirements
- Preoccupation with frameworks
- Too much detailing

**2. Predominant personality Style and its impact:** Majority of the people in the group were of thinking and judging types either ISTJ'S OR ESTJ'S. The sensing (s), thinking (T) and judging (J) types in the group tend to want to be in charge and do not want to allow others to influence them. They prefer details and factual data (but not the patterns and meanings in data); taking decisions based on logical analysis (not enough consideration to people issues) and preference for conclusion (may be before gathering enough data). Unwillingness to listen to others and consider their point of view results in the case of extraverted J's as a dominating and controlling style while in introverts' case resulting in doing by oneself when it becomes difficult to carry people along or include them. In either case, the benefit of others' opinions for a better solution is not taken. Criticism is not easily used for development. ISTJ (Introverted Sensing Thinking Judging) was the Modal type resulting in comparatively more of individual working or working with a few selected people while the role demands may be otherwise. Skills to include and involve more people came out as a critical area of development for a majority of people.

In this kind of predominant culture of the organisation, the diverse strengths of people of a different type – Intuitive/Feeling/Perceiving are not likely to be utilized. These people who are a minority are not understood and/or tend to withdraw as they believe that the different perspective that they have is either wrong or is not likely to be appreciated. Some of them attempt to shape themselves according to the prevailing majority believing that that is the right way to be and in the process losing their own strength and style. When they filled the MBTI

Instrument, most of them came out as thinking and judging type while later in explorations four people confirmed themselves as feeling type and three as perceiving types.

#### **4. Beliefs About People Particularly Customers**

There seemed to be a general belief that customers are not trustworthy and one does not have to listen to them or even if one does listen, not allow them to influence. There seemed to be an assumption operating that if we listen to people, they will try to get the maximum out of us to their advantage. Therefore it is better not to listen.

#### **5. Difficulties in being a participative leader:**

There were several issues and difficulties in being a participative leader for different members of the group and they work in such a way that it reduces involvement and participation on the whole:

- ❖ Lack of belief in people's competence
- ❖ Beliefs about people particularly Customers: not trustworthy, take advantage if we listen to them
- ❖ The personality type of concluding / deciding
- ❖ Introversion—preference for independent technical/expertise based functioning rather than involving people
- ❖ Difficulties in expressing and listening to feelings and handling intangible data
- ❖ Fears/hesitations etc.
- ❖ Validating the past -- that is the only way it works

#### **6. Changes required to move towards a participative/change-responsive Culture**

- ❖ Greater risk in expressing opinions more often to explore than state a final conclusion
- ❖ Balancing the need to give solutions with more data gathering and diagnosis.
- ❖ Use of enabling power and not only assertive/expertise power for development of subordinates
- ❖ Recognising and addressing feelings
- ❖ Trusting people's competence
- ❖ Balancing the need/willingness to be influenced and the need to control/take charge

#### **7. Common Areas of Learnings in the Laboratory:**

The above issues were recognized, explored and diagnosed to quite an extent in the laboratory and individual sessions. The following have come out repeatedly as the learnings of various days:

- ❖ Enhancing openness for personal effectiveness. Out of the three areas of personal effectiveness as per the instrument, effectiveness viz. self-disclosure, feedback and perceptiveness, self disclosure had the maximum score on blockages.
- ❖ Dealing with ambiguous and unstructured situations

- ❖ Learning to include people and listening to people
- ❖ Need to find out the root cause of the problem rather than jumping to conclusions without adequate diagnosis
- ❖ Willingness to listen to criticism for improvements
- ❖ Sensitivity to one's impact on others' feelings
- ❖ Working for larger goals than competing for individual winning
- ❖ Building trust and collaboration
- ❖ Recognising the need to utilize the individual abilities for group synergy
- ❖ Realising the importance of self-review and feedback

## **8. Individual Action Plans for Development.**

In addition to learning for the participants, this exercise resulted in a self-development plan for each participant based on the strengths and areas of improvement for each participant. These have been documented after the facilitation sessions and revised draft sent by the participant himself/herself. Some additions/modifications have been done by the consultant to make it more clear/specific and actionable based on her observations during the programme and in the individual sessions.

## **9. Common areas of further development based on Insights in the Laboratory and facilitation Sessions:**

- ❖ Fear of failure; being wrong or ridiculed; being different preventing from expressing views; need to be better than others, not do any wrong or not be criticized or cause hurt; postponing, waiting and analyzing etc. Language skills for some also become an added issue.
- ❖ Difficulty in Listening—I am right, other person knows less and/or may take advantage. Apparently contrary process/assumptions go together to reduce both expression as well as listening such as: Not taking the risk of expressing, the other person is not willing to listen, win-lose framework, not willing to consider after hearing (not wanting the control from other people), repertoire of participation largely restricted to logical arguments, not able to address feelings, empathise. This process reduces Initiative, responsiveness as well as influence and results in styles as manager of either telling or a lone performer.
- ❖ Either/or, 'Yes' and 'No', 'black and white' frameworks rather than open-ended questions for exploration and preconceived judgments about people
- ❖ Learning to gather data, diagnose before conclusions
- ❖ Generally task focus and not on future or vision
- ❖ Inability to work collaboratively, when required

## **10. Overall Group Readiness for Leadership Roles in Teams:**

Based on the strengths as they had emerged in the laboratory, the overall readiness of the people for leadership role in teams was also analysed. Some members of the group seemed to have a greater inclination and readiness to make contributions to group projects. Some members make good contributions and can confront issues, give new orientation to the group

processes and in the process provide leadership, though they may not speak so often. Some tend to take up the leadership in specific task situations. They need to improve on including others, listening and dealing with comparatively less structured situations. It was suggested that some members who have a different profile than the majority and should be included (while the prevailing pattern is that they either do not get accepted or they do not even try) and encouraged to participate in teams for projects as they will bring a diversity in perspective and enrich the solution though they may not lead the group as of now.

## **LEARNINGS ABOUT THE PROCESSES AS A PRACTITIONER**

Based on the experience of designing and conducting this and several such interventions in in-house settings, certain conditions seem to be conducive for such laboratories:

1. Trainer competence and facility with both structured and unstructured sessions and connect the two kinds of data emerging about the participants. The unstructured sessions need to provide the real experience of a T-Group focused of the 'Here and Now' while the structured sessions can progressively have more depth as the group members open up for learning. The facilitator needs to have the willingness and ability to switch roles, maintain boundaries and see connections.
2. Trainer/s' ability to be flexible and make a process-based intuitive judgement as to what may work after the unstructured session, which may be different from what was planned. It is important to have a plan but equally important to be ready to divert from the plan.
3. Facilitator needs to be willing to focus on objectives rather than being liked and admired. It is a matter of preference as well as the skill, a kind of an art. Every facilitator may neither be willing nor able to do it. Jain (2002) brought out in her research that the need to be seen as a nice, humane and empathetic person supports 'There & Then' work, because it seems to make it difficult for participants and trainers to refrain from making interventions which encourage 'There and Then' work. It was also found that the 'there and then' kind of work affects the outcomes of the laboratory. The prime areas of learnings become – understanding of back home issues and problems as experienced by the participants during the lab, a sense of relief and catharsis. Incidentally some learning about oneself also takes place.
4. Often, it has been found that the trainers/ facilitators have a preference for either structured / semi structured work or an undiluted unstructured T-Group methodology for personal growth. Based on my several experiences of the kind of laboratory described in this paper, I have now come to believe that it is not a compromise to combine both as long as the process and boundaries of the trainer role is maintained in the structured and T-group sessions. It was interesting to note that in each day's feedback as the laboratory proceeded, there was a mention of the insights people gained through the unstructured sessions. It seems that a majority of people found unstructured sessions very useful. However, there were some people who felt that they gained more in the structured activities and could not find meaning or participate effectively in the unstructured sessions. Therefore, given the time available, a combination of the two provides optimum scope for learning to all.

5. To accomplish all this in the time available, the trainer and participants need to be willing to work long hours.
6. It is a time and resource Intensive Intervention. It may not be that effective if we try to make it shorter than four days.
7. It is important to have it off site so that the participants can give undivided attention and be involved in the process with each other. Administrative support to take care of the external interface, exigencies etc. as was provided in this programme helps the facilitator/s to focus on their role.

## CONCLUSION

The patterns observed in this group are some of the common patterns in several groups with whom I have worked. A commonly voiced need in many organisations today is to make managers and leaders more participative, better team builders, more customer-responsive and change-responsive. This design of the laboratory as experienced in this and several such interventions earlier seems to help managers with a structured approach to open up with less threat and move towards working deeper in the unstructured sessions on the sources and impact of their styles. The laboratory also provides them space to experiment with some change. Hence, this combination of methods seems to make it an organizationally relevant and effective intervention for fulfilling these objectives. It is not to say that this was a perfect intervention or the whole process proceeded in a model or ideal way. It will also require systematic post-programme follow-up study to know the extent to which the learnings during the programme were carried forward and applied in the back home situations. However, the feedback during and after the programme shows that it was effective and there is a way to meet the specific needs of the organization while taking care of the doubts and apprehensions normally associated with the laboratory method of learning. This experience also brings out that the needs expressed by the client, though apparently contradictory with professional values and ethics can lead towards evolving new designs and further the profession.

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## REFERENCES

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## ANNEXURE I

### Personal Growth and Effectiveness Laboratory Broad Tentative Schedule

**Inaugural Session: 18.45 to 20.00 hours on the day  
of arrival at the venue followed by dinner**

#### Day 1

Time*	Content
09:00 – 10.45**	Introductions, expectations-sharing, setting the learning agenda and Process of learning
11:00 – 12.00	Exploring Personal Effectiveness: concept and exercise
12.00 – 13.00	Interpersonal Styles: self-awareness through Inventory and exploration in the group
13:45 – 14.45	Interpersonal Styles: self-awareness through Inventory and exploration in the group....contd.
14.45 – 15:30	Unstructured Group work (exploring deeper into interpersonal styles)
15:45 – 17:15	Unstructured Group work... contd.
19:00– 20.15	Conceptual Discussion and exercise on Listening
20:15 – 20:30	Learnings of the Day Feedback & Closing of the Day

#### Day 2

Time	Content
09:00 – 09:30	Check-in, Feedback on Feedback Agenda & schedule for the day
09:30 –10:45**	Exploring Personality Styles through MBTI
11:00 – 13:00	Exploring Personality Styles through MBTI...contd.
13.45 - 15:30	Unstructured Group work (exploring deeper into personality styles)
15:45– 17:15	Small group work on Personality types, potential strengths and pitfalls as leaders
19:00– 20.15	Presentations and explorations in the whole group
20:15 – 20:30	Learnings of the Day Feedback & Closing of the Day

### Day 3

Time	Content
09:00 – 09:30	Check-in, Feedback on Feedback Agenda & schedule for the day
09:30 – 10:45**	Understanding Group Processes: an exercise
11:00 – 13:00	Unstructured Group work (exploring group roles)
13.45 - 15:45	Understanding Conflict and Collaboration in Inter-group Dynamics: a learning game
16.00 – 18.00	Unstructured Group work (exploring self in group)
18.00 –18:15	Feedback & Closing of the Day
18:15 – 20.00	<i>Break &amp; Preparation for cultural evening</i>
20.00 Onwards: Cultural evening	

### Day 4

Time	Content
09:00 – 09:30	Check-in, Feedback on Feedback, Agenda & schedule for the day
09:30 – 10:45**	Identifying and Clarifying Values: Exercises
11:00 – 13:00	Identifying and Clarifying Values: Exercises Contd.
13.45 - 15:45	Open Group explorations: completing unfinished agenda at individual, interpersonal or group levels.
16.00 – 16.30	Feedback, briefing on the individual sessions & Closure

\*All timings are approximate. While the broad structure will be followed, exact time spent on various activities may vary with the needs and process of the group.

\*\*Break timings are not mentioned in the schedule. Normally there is a mid-morning and evening break and a lunch break. There is also a break before the late evening session.

## Annexure II

### **Self-Development Plan**

Name:

Current Designation:

MBTI TYPE

My Strengths

Areas of Improvements

Significant Insights about myself during the laboratory.

Action-steps that I will take to develop the areas identified for development.

Action

Time-frame

1.

2.

3.

4.

My support Group Partners.

What support do I need from the Organisation to develop my personal effectiveness?