Group communication skills workshop

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Never before has the accounting profession been so closely observed as it is today. Congressional committees, government agencies and self-regulating bodies within the profession itself are demanding that accounting firms maintain standards of performance of the highest quality. At Deloitte Haskins & Sells, this external scrutiny of the profession has confirmed the firm's historical dedication to the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of its practice.

"To help achieve this standard of excellence," says Bill Kuntz, partner in charge of the Continuing Education Department at Executive Office, "there must be a continuing process of education for all our professional people. At every level, whether involved in audit, tax, MAS, small business, industry or functional specialization, each person must grow to meet new and challenging assignments in a world that seems to change each day at an increasingly faster rate."

The CE department's main objective is to produce educational programs that meet the current requirements of theoretical knowledge and practical skills. However, says Bill, producing the courses is only part of the job; they must then be taught by qualified instructors so
of his performance as recorded on videotape.

San Francisco partner Eric Roberts (L) and Ron Burgenen, of the EO Continuing Education Department, discuss presentation given by Eric during Group Communication Skills Seminar. Every participant at the seminar met individually with an EO discussion leader for an analysis of his performance as recorded on videotape.

people in our firm who measure up to the best college instructors.

The Group Communication Skills workshop is an expanded version of the original day-and-a-half instructor-training programs. "We saw a need," says Bill, "to expand the program both in depth and breadth, to give more emphasis to developing and practicing these unique skills. We opened in Chicago in March, so to speak. The reviews were good enough to encourage us to sharpen the program and conduct five more workshops. Altogether we trained about 150 discussion leaders."

"Without question," says Charlie, "the most significant part of the program is the video portion. Every candidate makes two ten-minute videotaped presentations to other class members on subjects of his or her choice. Each presentation is reviewed in private with a trained counselor. The effect of seeing and hearing yourself on video is illuminating, to say the least. The television screen has no ax to grind; it presents you as you are, with all your strengths and weaknesses. Surprisingly, there usually is more good to see than bad. Counselors critique these presentations in a constructive fashion. They emphasize the stronger elements of the presentation so as to reinforce good performance. Of course, they also make suggestions for needed improvement in teaching methods, manners, etc., without quibbling over insignificant matters. Our goal is not to turn out a carbon-copy instructor, but to help each person make the greatest possible use of individual strengths. Without exception, the second videotaped presentation is substantially better than the first, and seeing their improvement, candidates leave the second review with added confidence and understanding.

"Another highlight of the workshop is the session on effective questioning techniques. The major objective here is to overcome the neophyte instructor's natural tendency to conduct a lecture, often boring, and instead have him learn how, through questioning, to get active participation and honest feedback from class members. A side benefit of this phase of the training is forcing people to think on their feet in pressure situations.

"We also conduct," says Charlie, "a session on the effective use of visual aids. If you've ever sat in a darkened room after lunch and watched an endless series of slides that covered too much material and couldn't be seen, you know there's got to be a better way. Our strategy is to emphasize building the visuals around the message, not vice versa. There are a number of visual aids: slides, overhead transparencies, flip charts, video, film, handouts, etc. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. We want the instructor candidate to understand which aid best fits his or her purpose and how to use that aid effectively.

"A part of the workshop that brings a few chuckles but has a serious purpose is the handling of problem participants. Anyone who instructs eventually meets a personality in the classroom who is antagonistic, withdrawn, clownish, indifferent, dominant or hung over, to name a few types. Using role playing, we demonstrate how to deal with these individuals so as to maintain control of the class and the respect of class members."

"This year," says Charlie, "we added a half-day session on conference leadership. Using practical exercises, we demonstrated and practiced the art of leading a problem-solving conference. These skills can be used not only in training sessions, but also in business situations in serving clients or in the practice office."

"We are pleased so far," says Bill Kuntz, "with the results of the Group Communication Skills workshop. We intend to continue it next year. Our goal is to have every potential instructor attend the program early in his or her career. From first-year instructor to the senior and manager meetings through partner education, we see a perpetual need for top-quality instructors. We believe the teaching role is an integral part of achieving the firm's goal of progressive excellence and is also a valuable part of each instructor's personal development."
Participant in Group Communication Skills Seminar gives presentation which is being recorded on videotape. Later, each person attending the seminar met with member of the Continuing Education Department for an analysis of the taped presentation. A second presentation was taped later in the seminar, allowing each individual to see clearly the improvement that had been made.

Charlie Goldsmith (standing, foreground), DB&S coordinator for management education, and Ron Burgener (standing, rear), discussion leader from the EO Continuing Education Department, check progress of buzz group during Group Communication Skills Seminar held at the Nassau Inn in Princeton, New Jersey. Ron is now with our Houston office.