OBM Panel Discussion Introduction

Jerry Pounds

ABA's 2003 conference offered two panel discussions designed to entertain and educate students and practitioners alike. The eight panelists, each with an average of 25 years of field experience, presented the active history of OBM from its beginnings in the early 1970s to the present.

These pioneering practitioners are an eclectic group whose educational backgrounds are as mixed as the Foreign Legion. In the early days of OBM's history, they triumphed over barriers and conditions that are unimaginable in today's workplaces. For example, current conventional wisdom is that people are considered as valued assets to an organization. Yet, in OBM's early years, its pioneers were sometimes physically threatened in training rooms and on shop floors simply for asserting that employees' efforts and achievements should be acknowledged.

In the early 1970s, practitioners developed some very creative ways to overcome the chasm that existed between ABA and the organizational cultures of that era. These consultants not only endured but also prospered using management techniques that overcame the resistance to change they frequently encountered. Theirs are valuable lessons to be learned about adaptability and resourcefulness in the face of hostile disagreement and apathy.

The Changing Organizational Climate

Like the early settlers of our nation who rode the Conestoga wagons westward into undiscovered territory, the real OBM journey began at the end of the trip. Once these specialists avoided being expelled from client sites, they faced the challenge of accomplishing performance improvement through behavior change. Because corporate cultures with uniform values was only a concept in the distant future, these pioneers were charged with developing a myriad of new training and consulting models to adjust to the widely varying, personality-driven management systems of the 70s. In that era, each plant manager created a world molded after his own image with the obligatory eccentricities that accompany unrestricted power. Employees who worked in a devalued state of fear and alienation were a common characteristic of such personality-driven management systems.

Our female consultants had to overcome all the issues mentioned above plus the onus of male chauvinism. Bias and harassment were almost everyday occurrences for female OBM practitioners, conditions that forced them to develop client management skills as complex as the social environments within which they were trying to function; therefore, the women who became successful consultants had to be extremely competent, intelligent and adaptive.

Our society has changed considerably since 1970. When we started, Watergate, feminism, diversity, computer technology, Quality Circles, empowerment, reengineering, downsizing, participation, and the valuing the individual employee were all in the future. Each phase and passage of American society has created unique challenges for organizational change. The consultants on these panels will explain how the impact of quality, the search for excellence and the new executive social conscience affected client management and OBM methodology over the years.

The constantly evolving organizational climate also reflected a distinct change in the personal values of employees who changed with the times and demanded more meaningful work. The days of the
assembly-line worker who was once happy to bring home good wages has rapidly retreated and been replaced by employees who want task variation. To use the language of our technology, their reinforcers changed. Over time, management and employees experienced value changes at different rates and with different behavioral effects. In environments in which words and phrases that were acceptable one day could change connotations overnight, OBM pioneers constantly reframed their language and tactics to synchronize with the fluid social environment.

**Mastering the Territory**

Our hardy OBM pioneers made the rough journey through the valley of values and perspectives and established their domains within the culture of their client organizations. All they had to do was provide entertaining and fulfilling training, prepare the organization for change, establish new management values, change management behavior, install a system for managing performance, collect pre- and post data on all the important performance variables, coach supervisors to use positive reinforcement and give timely feedback, set up a positive accountability system for management to ensure they did what the consultant asked, deflect attempts to discredit their methods and/or professional value initiated by supervisors and managers who didn't want to change, and, in their spare time, make sure that performers in every area made significant improvements. Their compensation was 100% contingent and they kept their jobs by always doing the job.

In a nutshell, these ABA panel members made all of the above happen. Under the worst of circumstances they created change that resulted in measurable and significant performance improvement. They brought plants and companies from worst to first and earned enough trust, support and freedom to move the methodology throughout large corporations while remaining the performance specialists of choice for many clients. They worked in every type of business and industry around the world with similar results. Like chameleons they adapted, they grew and developed, and they endured where many failed.

The expertise of this group is corroborated by significant data. Collectively, these panelists have trained over 500,000 managers and supervisors, worked in 2000 plus individual client facilities and returned over $1,000,000,000 in client performance gains and cost savings. In doing so, they have also spent several years of their lives in hotels and have each traveled millions of miles to service their clients.

Much of the literature by well-known OBM writers was derived directly from the ideas and experiences of these people. They borrowed heavily from the tactics and methods of field practitioners. The trial-and-error lessons they contributed to the knowledge base of their employers informed the development of methodological changes, new principles and new products. They are the roots that nourished the tree of behavioral technology and helped it flourish.

Anyone who thinks he or she will ever be involved in changing behavior in an organizational setting should sit before these survivors and ask them the important questions - the answers to which may become the roadmap to their future careers. Each of these men and women worked unsupervised and in many cases had to work with insufficient support from their employers. They were alone on a hostile frontier. They endured, they prospered, they overcame and they succeeded in turning hostile skeptics into happy clients.

**Creating a Heritage**
OBM, a once radical new technology, is now adrift with no solid sense of identity. There are no enduring myths or great stories to perpetuate its significance and value. There are no ceremonial passages with rich regalia to entice students toward OBM as a career. Where is the rich heritage of evocative stories about the trials and tribulations of individualists and the anecdotes depicting their heroic efforts? There is no documentation of our pioneers, our heroes that would inspire students of our field and infuse them with a desire to become a part of something grand - something of value.

Our panelists will relate the rich experiences, the frustrations, fears, defeats and victories that characterize their histories. They will provide the beginnings of an experiential history that each person in attendance can internalize and that OBM can build upon as it moves forward into the new millennium. They will allow those in attendance to become part of a story in which they can play a role now and in the future.