

3 May 1974

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Medical Services
SUBJECT : Sensitivity Training

1. "T-Groups", "Encounter Groups", "Sensitivity Training Groups", and similar terms are used to describe a variety of kinds of group experiences which have certain elements in common. Carl Rogers, a leading proponent of this experience, has summarized in his book, On Encounter Groups, the common elements as follows:

"The facilitator (leader) develops a psychological climate of safety in which freedom of expression and reduction of defensiveness gradually occur. In such a psychological climate many of the immediate feeling reactions of each member toward others, and of each member toward himself, tend to be expressed. A climate of mutual trust develops out of this mutual freedom to express real feelings, positive and negative. Each member moves toward greater acceptance of his total being -- emotional, intellectual, and physical -- as it is, including its potential. With individuals less inhibited by defensive rigidity, the possibility of change in personal attitudes and behavior, in professional methods, in administrative procedures and relationships, becomes less threatening. With the reduction of defensive rigidity, individuals can hear each other, can learn from each other, to a greater extent. There is a development of feedback from one person to another, such that each individual learns how he appears to others and what impact he has in interpersonal relationships. With this greater freedom and improved communication, new ideas, new concepts, new directions emerge. Innovation can become a desirable rather than a threatening possibility. These learnings in the group experience tend to carry over, temporarily or more permanently, into the relationships with spouse, children, students, subordinates, peers, and even superiors following the group experience."

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2. An overwhelming majority of participants in such groups emerge with the conviction that they have benefited in some way from the experience. The extent to which such alleged benefits are reflected in behavior observable to others is controversial. The extent to which persons are changed in ways judged harmful by others is also controversial. Beneficial results are emphasized and harmful effects minimized by those most active in the field (e.g., Rogers). Criticism comes mostly from those not personally involved in the conduct of such groups. Some of the latter are people who, while "outside the movement", have dealt with individuals and organizations who have used these methods extensively. [REDACTED] for example, has been highly critical.

3. Evaluation of the effects of a specific program of this type in the Agency could be undertaken. It would require a carefully controlled study, and would entail before-and-after measurements using both self-report data and descriptive behavioral data collected from peers, supervisors, and subordinates. If the Agency were to proceed with training of this type, I would recommend that such a study be undertaken.

4. A prior question, however, is whether on the basis of present knowledge and professional judgment a sensitivity training effort should go forward. My recommendation is negative, for the following reasons:

a. Lack of evidence that such training results in behavioral change beneficial to the organization.

b. Evidence that some people are harmed by the experience.

5. In making these judgments, I recognize that self-reports of personal benefit tend to overwhelm the counsel of caution. I would point out that intensely emotionally-involving group experience of any sort sets into motion a set of group dynamics that destroys objective individual judgment -- a point illustrated most dramatically by "brain-washing" in China and less dramatically in any number of other intensive group experiences designed to produce attitude change. The very power of these techniques argues as strongly as any other specific evidence for proceeding with caution.

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[REDACTED]
Chief, Psychological Services Staff
Office of Medical Services

ROUTING AND RECORD SHEET

SUBJECT: (Optional)

Sensitivity Training

FROM:

C/PSS/OMS
706 CofC

EXTENSION

3250

NO.

DATE

3 May 1974

TO: (Officer designation, room number, and building)

DATE

OFFICER'S INITIALS

COMMENTS (Number each comment to show from whom to whom. Draw a line across column after each comment.)

No.	TO:	DATE		OFFICER'S INITIALS	COMMENTS
		RECEIVED	FORWARDED		
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