

Rethinking Behavior Analysis: A Review of *Rethinking America:*

A New Game Plan from the American Innovators: Schools, Business, People, Work
by Hedrick Smith (Random House: New York, 1995, 420 pp., \$25, \$15 paper)

Beth Sulzer-Azaroff
The Browns Group

Wake up America! Wake up behavior analysts! Our nation is careening towards a dual-class society as the gap between the rich and the poor widens. Real wages of workers slide while executive compensation soars into the multi-million dollar range. Downsizing and offshore business relocations sweep jobs aside like so many autumn leaves. In the aftermath, insufficient preparation blocks the displaced worker from competing for whatever attractive positions remain. Meanwhile, wealthy investors gain enormous profits by playing the daily trading game with their own or other peoples' money.

Smith's Analysis

Too many employees with limited basic knowledge, thinking and performance skills characterize our workforce. Inability to read robotics manuals, calculate averages or percentages, and solve technical or simple operational problems lower the individual worker's contribution to struggling enterprises. Our frontier go-it-alone heritage spawns a competitiveness antithetical to the cooperation required for productive team planning and problem solving.

Armed with comparative facts and figures on academic preparedness and a set of graphic case studies, Hedrick Smith sounds the alarm. No wonder the economies of other advanced industrialized nations like Germany and Japan are outstripping ours. Their more highly skilled workforce is much better attuned to the values of cooperation and collaboration. They are groomed to wait patiently.

Smith ascribes blame more broadly than just to students, schools, and cultural values, though. Take, for instance, our prevalent corporate obsession with quarterly profits instead of long-range growth. Spurred by investors, cherished by senior executives, this pursuit of the *quick fix* breeds ultimate self destruction.

Why is this an issue? If showing gains each quarter is what matters most, we slight the research, planning and development requisite for extended viability. Casting about for a fund of ready cash sources, officers raid R & D budgets, metaphorically consuming their own seed corn in the process.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Please address all correspondence to: Beth Sulzer-Azaroff, 5555 Heron Point Drive, Naples, FL 33963.

SULZER-AZAROFF

Another temporary expedient for keeping current costs down is the slash and burn approach to administering personnel. Downsize! Then when the crunch comes, assign remaining employees debilitating overtime schedules or hire temporary personnel. This is hardly a recipe for generating loyal, energetic, skilled personnel needed to produce top quality goods or services.

From whence does the obsession with quarterly profits stem? Smith attributes it in part to the *mindset* of people like investors of pension plans, mutual fund managers and corporate raiders. People in such roles share little stake in the long-term future of the enterprise, instead playing the game of fast turn-around for immediate profit. Executives, too, with an eye to the stock options they receive as a portion of their compensation packages, are ever watchful. A lackluster quarterly report just might spur a drop in the value of their shares.

Nor, Smith would contend, do our governmental policies help. Rather they place American (i.e., U.S.) business at a disadvantage, especially when contrasted with their most serious competitors, Germany and Japan. Selected by Smith as *benchmarks* against which to compare contemporary American performance, these two nations enjoy the support of liberal national policies and inducements. Public policy also encourages inter-organizational collaboration for long-term growth and development of their products or processes. To illustrate, during the last decade, a consortium of European nations gave extended support to the development of Airbus, permitting it to achieve its current high profile in the aircraft industry. Cross-industry collaboration of a kind that surely would rate an accusation of restraint of trade in this country, helped Japan purloin from the US its current preeminence in the microchip business.

Our traditional lines of authority are another contributor. Smith warns that we shall not be able to capitalize optimally on our human capital potential until organizations grant a portion of control to the real stake-holders in an enterprise: The customers, employees, and the local community. That requires the traditional mighty chief executive officer to relinquish some power and all its accompanying reinforcers (decision-making capacity, status, cash, attention, admiration, etc). Small wonder this is not readily achieved.

In these terms, Hedrick Smith expounds on the basis for the United State's deteriorating economic condition. What does this portend as the working poor get poorer and become increasingly discontent? Historians will remind us that such conditions sow the seeds of anarchy, revolution, and tyranny. Behavior analysts, who recognize these as extinction and punishment conditions, would anticipate aggression or withdrawal. They would not be surprised to see people limit their acceptable performance to the narrow range of stimulus conditions that signal shelter from punishment.

Wherein Does the Hope Lie?

For Smith, the solution lies in emulating exemplary German and Japanese practices: In education, in their treatment of their workers, in the internal and external relationships formed by organizations, and through governmental support and policy change. In building his case, Smith vividly depicts the German

RETHINKING BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS

apprenticeship system, showing how companies like Mercedes can forge successful partnerships with the schools. Industry develops training courses, sets standards, does most of the training, runs the examinations and certifies that apprentices (typically non-college-bound students in the last two years of secondary school) meet Germany's tough quality standards.

It can happen here. Smith is convincing. When the governor of Wisconsin encouraged state industries to adopt this apprenticeship model, the printing industry signed on. Sixteen-year-old Eric Baumann served as a prototypic participant. After immersing himself in the program, Eric's mother reported the boy's self-esteem, happiness, motivation, conversational material and school grades improved.

The Japanese purportedly esteem children's spontaneity, yet focus on group, rather than individual attainment during the early years of school. Presumably this prepares students for successful power sharing and team collaboration later on the job.

People must be the prime focus. Smith contrasts General Motors, who invests heavily in technological substitutes for workers and lost, to Ford innovators, who decided to take a page from the Japanese book by investing in their employees. Teamwork, empowering workers (even to the extent that they could elect to shut down the line) and building a new cooperation with labor raised Ford's productivity and subsequent profits enormously.

The German tendency is also to invest in their workers. If demand for a given product begins to wane, the company avoids laying off workers. Instead, it might branch into new pursuits, retraining the work force accordingly.

Japanese companies like Toyota are known for their practice of lifetime employment, a custom that engenders employee loyalty. Thanks to the influence of Deming, they emphasize continuous skill enhancement, team building, and fostering worker participation and a sense of ownership in solving problems.

In the United States, Motorola was convinced by the merit of such practices. They offer extensive training programs and other methods that reflect the high value they place on their employees. This strategy seems to have paid off handsomely. Unlike many of their now moribund former U.S. competitors in the electronics industry, Motorola thrives.

Smith's Prescriptions

"Rethink," Smith counsels. (Although reading between the lines, what he really means is *change*.) Restructure our schools, businesses, government policies and practices. Form partnerships among education, business and the government. Modify our outmoded anti-trust laws. De-emphasize focus on the self in favor of collaboration, beginning with young children and carrying through into adult working life. Reorganize businesses: flatten management; cross-train personnel so each team member excels in performing multiple jobs. Involve internal (people "down the line") and external customers (e.g., purchasers) within teams. Encourage their input during planning and development phases. They know what they want and will protect companies from costly mistakes.

Hedrick Smith's style, undoubtedly finely honed during his 26 year stint as a

SULZER-AZAROFF

reporter for the *New York Times*, is highly engaging. He uses vivid anecdotes and case studies to support his conclusions and recommendations. He also presents such evidence as long-term outcomes (viability, expansions, market share, return on investment) and in-process results (the status of labor relations, turnover and attendance, patterns of productivity and quality). What he does not do, however, is offer the sort of evidence we behavior analytic scientists and technologists treasure. He does not base his conclusions on controlled studies. No multiple baselines; no ABABs; not even any statistical group comparisons are mentioned. The potential for more rigorous analyses is there, though. (Readers casting about for researchable topics, take note.)

Rethinking Behavior Analysis

Smith's rallying cry must convince every reader to act quickly—before it's too late. Unfortunately, though, no matter how skillfully crafted, a book like this is but a set of discriminative stimuli that can set the stage for action. We know that real change requires more ... and you and I know how to do it.

If you are thinking "**They** should ..." Stop!. You cannot make others behave. Think instead "**I** can..." because you only can do what **you** can do; that is to set up a supportive context and look for ways that gradual change in the right direction may be reinforced (that is, *shape*). Explore where openings might exist for you to promote steady (though not necessarily instant) improvement in the functioning of schools, the workplace, families, the community or search for novel opportunities. Here are some possibilities:

Question the Target Goals of Your Research or Application

For more durable change, see what the current context will support in the long as well as the short run. If an organization reserves reinforcers only for quarterly profits, do not expect it to invest in activities that will only pay off after several years. Go elsewhere or work on changing the reinforcement structure first.

Involve the real stakeholders in the process of setting long- and short-range goals: Along with investors or shareholders, external customers; employees; community representatives, etc. Consider forecasters' knowledge about current and future policy and legal trends, marketplace supports and impediments, needs, competition, new directions. This will heighten ongoing support.

Gather and Use Demonstrated Scientific Findings and Technological Methods

Incorporate them in the systems you develop or recommend to others for meeting not just immediate exigencies but long-term vitality. A couple of examples come to mind from our own work.

One case relates directly to the assumption that well designed and supported work teams engender healthier interpersonal relationships. In that study (Frankowski & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1978), we compared productivity rates under individual versus group contingencies. Reinforcement depended either on the number of assemblies

completed by each individual or on the average number done by the composite group. We found few disparities in output under either condition, but substantial differences in how the group members interacted afterward. Following the group condition, members were friendlier and got along better.

Another ties into one of Smith's recurring themes: Impatient Americans go for the occasional home run; the more temperate Japanese are content with a continuous stream of singles. We need to learn patient waiting. Unfortunately, it does appear that many Americans tend to be intolerant of delayed gratification. Can impatient Boards of Directors and CEO's adjust their actions to support slow, steady growth instead? A while back, Julie Schweitzer and I (Schweitzer & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1988) wondered if small impulsive children could learn to wait patiently for a more delayed but also more beneficial result. Indeed they could, when we extended the delay periods imperceptibly but steadily over time.

Smith tells a success story about a Harlem school, Central Park East, to illustrate the power of effective educational innovation. The curriculum was rooted in the real world and included teaching logic, perspective, making connections and other valuable skills: The internal organization, of the school and its interface with the community were restructured. In stunning contrast with other schools in the area, over 90% of these students graduated and of that group, 90% went on to college.

Applied behavior analysis also has its share of success stories (and they are scientifically documented, too). Examples include: The value of maximizing opportunities for active engagement and reinforcing correct responding, as seen in *Direct Instruction*; the power of generating momentum inherent in *Precision Teaching*; contingency systems that heighten rate and quality of learning and many others. Such behavior-analytically based methods show that given favorable conditions, children can achieve handsomely. Tactics like these prepare them to enter the world of work with more advanced skills than they otherwise would have achieved.

Disseminate Well-established Findings beyond as well as within the Profession and Science

Familiar ways of contacting our peers are journal articles, convention papers, and/or text books. To reach the general public, schools, businesses, and governmental agencies, we need to be more innovative. The Cambridge Forums on Leadership, Economic Decision Making, Occupational Safety and others (presented by the publisher of this journal) are directed primarily to external consumers. Trade books, audio-video programs, public lectures and workshops, articles in the popular press, and on-site consulting are additional steps.

Conduct Basic and Applied Research to Test the Reliability of and Spin-offs from Smith's Recommendations

Find ways to:

- Promote originality and creativity; productive, cooperative team efforts, especially following extended histories of competitive individual contingencies.

SULZER-AZAROFF

- Establish rule governance when it is called for (e.g., in long-range planning)
- Fade rules and generate "automatic" fluency, when rules would intrude (performing safely; perfectly every time, without delaying to recite a rule).
- Intensively investigate the educational, business and governmental practices he propounds. See if they really functionally relate to enhanced, durable, profitable performance.

Conduct experimental analyses by capitalizing on natural opportunities. Instead of introducing an intervention throughout a school or factory, delay applying it to some units. Then directly replicate with one, then after a while, another. You will have a lovely across-settings multiple-baseline design. Sometimes an ABAB withdrawal design happens inadvertently. Smith relates how the Caterpillar company went from autocracy to collaboration on the factory floor, back to autocracy again. Production and labor relations went from poor to good, back to poor, as the conditions alternated. Assuming Caterpillar manages to survive long enough, perhaps they will reintroduce their B condition. Ergo: an ABAB design.

Find New Sources and Systems for Reinforcing Progress toward Sound Long-term Goals in the Public Interest

These might stem from within yourself, the team, the organization, or from outside. For instance, groups and organizations, such as the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies, could cooperate by devising ways to recognize and reward innovations supportive of a healthier economic future for America and the world.

Hedrick Smith admonishes us to *rethink* America. Concerned, responsive behavior analysts will re-**act**.

REFERENCES

- Frankowsky, R., & Sulzer-Azaroff, B. (1978). Individual and group contingencies and collateral social behaviors. *Behavioral Therapy*, 9, 313-327. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7894\(78\)80075-6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7894(78)80075-6)
- Schweitzer, J. B., & Sulzer-Azaroff, B. (1988). Self-control: Teaching tolerance for delay in impulsive children. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 50, 173-186. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1901/jeab.1988.50-173>