



fourteen

Paris Calls



DURING THE SUMMER OF 1963, I had a visit from two interesting people. One was the managing director of a worldwide consulting firm based in Paris. The other was A. Robert Taylor, a sophisticated, savvy, and energetic man who had earned his bones—and then some—in the executive search and selection enterprise after a successful career as a Human Resources VP. These two gentlemen had traveled from Paris to (a) check me out, and (b) determine whether I'd be interested in joining their new venture as technical director. Their plan was to establish a consulting firm—Learning Systems Institute—offering programmed instruction solutions to companies in half a dozen European countries. (We were still in the initial rise of the normal enthusiasm curve described a few pages back.)

Bob Taylor described the performance problems and training situation in Europe and tried to convince me I'd be just the person to help provide solutions. After a lengthy discussion, I took my visitors





to dinner at a well-known Palo Alto restaurant, where they received a taste of American “sophistication.” When the managing director asked the waitress which wine she recommended, she nudged him in the shoulder with an elbow and said, “Take the red—it’s good and cold.” After that gargantuan gaffe, I was sure the deal was off. Fortunately, I was wrong. Whew!

If I accepted the offer, it would entail a move almost halfway around the world to an alien culture. My family and I teetered on the razor blade of indecision for some time. Finally, desperate for input, I followed a suggestion to talk with Dr. Ernest Hilgard, Stanford professor of education. He was only a mile or two away, so I asked for a meeting. He graciously agreed.

My main concern, I explained to him, was that if I moved to France I’d be out of sight, and touch (e-mail and fax didn’t yet exist), and might not be able to find a job on returning to the USA. He counseled that nothing was certain, but thought the move would help, rather than hinder, my career. That did it; my wife and I decided to take the plunge. Another whack, this time landing me halfway around the world.

During the fall of 1963 we sailed to Paris (LeHavre, actually) by way of the S.S. France. It was a grand ship and gave our two boys a taste of the elegant life. Children were not allowed into the dining room for dinner, of course (an eminently civilized custom), but the boys didn’t care. They had their own dining room and access to a large, well-equipped playroom, complete with nannies and food service.

The pleasant passage was followed by a difficult beginning. More than culture shock had to be survived. Our furniture wouldn’t arrive for six weeks, my office wouldn’t be ready for three weeks, and the villa we’d rented couldn’t be occupied for almost a month. We had no choice but to camp out in a small French hotel. On the top floor, of course, just under the roof. During those weeks, the top of a steamer trunk became my office; a borrowed portable typewriter served as my office equipment. My French was mostly non-existent—a few



tattered memories from slogging my way through *Les Trois Mousquetaires*. So much for a whiz-bang beginning in a foreign culture.

Nonetheless, the work was challenging. I spent most of my time traveling by train from one country to another, trying to remember how to say “please” and “thank you” in the upcoming language, reviewing notes about customs to observe, and thinking about the forthcoming project.

Before the enterprise could become fully functional, we needed a few people who could be trained to develop programmed instruction. Where to look? How to advertise? Fortunately, the wisdom of Peter Pipe surfaced once again. “Programming is writing, and journalists write,” he said. “If, at the end of the day, you want words on paper, hire journalists, not educators.” That was good advice. Still is. When interviewing candidates, my first question became, “Can you show me something you’ve written? Anything. Letters, fiction, reports, grocery lists . . .” The notion was that if they hadn’t written anything in the past, they wouldn’t be comfortable with or good at a writing-intensive job with us.

The projects themselves were challenging, but not because the problems were difficult to solve. The challenge was all too often how to inform clients their problem couldn’t be solved by instruction—programmed or otherwise. The European environment was considerably more formal than our own, so such messages had to be crafted with a great deal of tact.

In London, for example, I visited a large engineering consulting firm that wanted us to program the accounting portion of their training for newly hired engineering consultants. It seemed the instructor of that four-hour block wasn’t very good at making accounting principles clear to the trainees. Hence the request for a programmed solution. That sounded reasonable, but a few questions made it clear that the proposed program was unnecessary. The new-hires not only didn’t need to know anything about accounting, they’d damned well better not even *pretend* to know anything about accounting. Company policy forbade engineering consultants from



dabbling in accounting; if it looked as though a client needed accounting assistance, the consultants were expected to call the home office.

Analysis needed

And so it went. After meeting with just a few potential clients I'd become painfully aware of the need for a screening device to filter client requests. It seemed like a slam dunk: Clients asked for instruction to solve their problems, and we had instruction to sell, so it seemed like an easy match. But it wasn't. When clients identified a problem involving any human performance, they always seemed to conclude that instruction was the remedy. And why not? It was how people everywhere in the world thought. The mantra seemed to be: If they're not doing what they should be doing, train 'em. No need to find out if they already knew how, or if something else prevented the desired performance.

This was how the world thought about the issue of training in 1964–65. Corporations had Training Departments, and training was what they delivered. Not solutions to problems—but training. Almost all perceived or imagined aberrations in human performance were “solved” by training. Period. That mindset is obsolete now, though it is still practiced. (Sigh.)

Had Learning Systems Institute not been an ethical enterprise, we could have provided training whenever it was requested. Life would have been easier and far more profitable. But our goal was to serve clients, not to provide worthless “solutions.” Our need for a screening mechanism intensified. I dreamed about an algorithm to help clients determine whether they'd guessed right or wrong about training as the solution to their problem, something that wouldn't require us to invent tactful ways of saying, “Training won't help your situation one damn bit!”

My initial approach was to list conditions that would influence the recommendation of a training program versus something else. “How big is the population of trainees?” Too few students meant



programmed instruction wouldn't be economically feasible, no matter how strong the need. "How much lead time is available?" Programming took time, and short lead time mitigated against using that technique. "Do they already know how do what you want them to do?" was also included—no point in teaching what they already knew.

My next step was to arrange the screening questions, in order of priority. For example, questions about the number of potential trainees and lead time came first. Unless the right conditions prevailed, there was no need to proceed to the questions that followed.

This was the beginning of what turned out to be the performance analysis procedure. After returning to the U.S., I enlisted Peter Pipe to collaborate on a book we eventually called *Analyzing Performance Problems*. It was published in 1970.

Teaching the test

On the one hand, we had companies clamoring for programmed instruction . . . but in the academic world resistance to change was as strong as ever. At a boys' junior high school in Genoa, Italy, we conducted a demonstration pitting programmed instruction against the traditional classroom methodology. One algebra class was selected to serve as the experimental group (programmed instruction or PI) and another as the control group (traditional instruction).

We wrote the first draft in English, translated it into French, conducted tryouts and revisions in that language, then transculturated the revised French version into Italian. Does that make your head hurt? It did ours, too, but we persevered until it was time to conduct the tryout.

By the time we arrived in Genoa for the tryout, we already had one strike against us—as soon as the teacher for the PI group was selected, he was branded a traitor to the school and shunned by his colleagues. The experiment began in that environment.

During a later visit to check on progress, I stepped into the control group classroom. Much to my astonishment, the teacher was *teaching*



the test! The teacher would chant, “The answer to number three is A,” and the students would chant back, “The answer to number three is A.”

Angry at how our “experiment” was being undermined, I stormed to the headmaster’s office and recounted my tale of woe. “Mister _____ is teaching the test!” I wailed. The headmaster looked at me as though I’d gone mad, but called for the teacher to join us. The conversation went something like this:

Headmaster: “Is it true you are teaching the test?”

Teacher: “Yes, of course!”

Headmaster: “And why are you teaching the test?”

Teacher (Proudly): “Because *I* was selected to uphold the honor of the school against programmed instruction.”

Whereupon the headmaster looked in my direction, shrugged his shoulders, and said, “*See?*”

The programmed instruction group still performed better than the group rote-taught the test. Even so, the episode in Genoa pounded another nail into the conviction that effectiveness and efficiency are lower in priority than people pretend they are. In other words, all is not as it seems—or alleged.

I suppose it would be comforting to think that events such as these occur only in the Italian hinterlands. Not even close. Turf-protecting events are found everywhere; no country is immune from the fervent desire to protect the status quo.

Culture shock lives

The European experience was a large, and sometimes painful, growth experience, mainly because of the challenge of blending into cultures so different from our own . . . while trying to do meaningful work. I found it difficult to work in two or three cultures every week. I found it hard to formulate tactful ways to inform the client that instruction



wouldn't help. I found it especially difficult to keep from blurting out an obvious "solution" before understanding whether the client was actually interested in solving the problem. Many were not. Hidden agendas were everywhere.

Sometimes it seemed as though the entire country conspired to prevent us from doing an honest day's work. When the electric typewriter we'd leased for my office finally was delivered, and I asked that it be plugged in and turned on, I was told, "Oh, no, no, no, monsieur. I'm just the delivering man. The plugging-in man will come tomorrow." (Why not plug it in myself? Don't ask.) Exasperating. When a truck arrived to deliver the dining room table and chairs we'd purchased, the table was unloaded. Period. I asked about the chairs.

"The chairs will be delivered on the "fragile" truck," I was told, with the usual Gallic shrug. As promised, the chairs arrived on the "fragile" truck only a few days later.

When I grumbled about the strangling bureaucracy, I was told—more than once—"Just wait. In twenty years America will be suffering from it, too." Unfortunately, they were absolutely right. The world is slowly strangling in red tape.

When it was time to arrange for a work permit, my secretary called the Préfect de Police to ask what documents I would need for my interview.

"Oh, no, no, no, Madame. First, you must come here, and *then* we will tell you what documents he must bring." Another half-day wasted.

Shopping was also a challenge. Breakfast cereal? Shrug. Catsup? Scowl. I soon developed the habit of smuggling two or three bottles of catsup in my briefcase when returning from trips to London. (I won't even mention what the French thought about people who squirt catsup onto their food.) But it was fun to shop in the village where we lived . . . where wine was thirty-nine cents a bottle.

On the bright side, trains ran on time, the food was excellent, and the people charming. More important, the medical system was superb.



When my younger son was whisked to the hospital with a serious malady, the care was instant, attentive, and first-rate. Almost without charge—even for foreigners. The entire bill for several days of hospital care came to 459 French francs—about \$92.00.

The European experience wasn't all hard work and tears. Sometimes it was just embarrassing. My French was sketchy at best, and I still suffered from culture shock, but I jumped in and did the best I could, often to hilarious results. One day I was so busy at my desk I simply ignored the ringing telephone. Soon, I could hear our French-only receptionist tromping toward my office on the squeaky wood floor. Bursting into the office, she said, "You are here!"

"Oui," I replied, continuing my work.

"Why don't you answer your phone?" she demanded, again in French.

In perfect French, I responded, "Mon cheval est mouillé!" (my horse is wet!). It was the only phrase I could think of at the moment, learned that very morning from one of my boys' French primers. After that, I always tried out new phrases on her as I exited the creaky elevator on my trek to the office. We became fast friends—no doubt because of my entertainment value.

The most embarrassing incident, however, occurred during a dinner party at a posh restaurant. I asked the location of the rest room, which opened right onto the main dining room. On entering, I couldn't find the light switch, so I leaned out and called, "Où est le lit?" thinking I had asked, "Where's the light switch?" After the laughter died down, I was told where it was. On returning to the table I was informed that I had asked, "Where's the bed?" Oh well.

My fractured French also saved me one day while driving my mini-car along the Champs Elysées. A French policeman stopped me and loosed a tirade too fast for me to understand. When he stopped to come up for air, I leaned my head out and said, "Vous parlez Français très bien, monsieur." (You speak French very well, sir.) That stopped him cold, after which he could only shake his head, probably wondering what else he could expect from a crazy American.



He waved me on.

Spark Plugs 'R Us

Shortly after the Genoa boys' school "experiment," an opportunity presented itself that allowed me to practice what I was learning about the yet-unnamed performance analysis. Interestingly, the assignment had nothing whatsoever to do with instruction, programmed or otherwise. But it was this experience that sharpened my perception of how seriously the work environment can impact job performance and learning.

I was asked to perform a review of a spark plug factory in a charming village in central France. The factory had recently been converted from felt hats to spark plugs, and the managing director was concerned that the workers, mostly farm-raised women, would be less satisfied wrestling forty-pound boxes of spark plugs than needle and thread. (He needn't have worried; these women were no strangers to heavy lifting and found making spark plugs more to their liking than sewing felt hats.)

Because there had been reason to make the factory conversion happen as rapidly as possible, the managing director had sent a chemical engineer from Paris to set up the production line. Time was of the essence and there wasn't any choice. Though this engineer had no experience at this task, he dug in and did the best he could. And his best was none too shabby. By the time I arrived, they were making high quality spark plugs, and the women periodically burst into song at their work stations.

Not being familiar with principles of production flow, this engineer had set up the production line according to his version of "logical." He began by placing the larger pieces of machinery into available spaces, then tucked the smaller pieces into whatever empty spaces remained. "Is that an empty space over there in the corner? Fine. We'll put a drill press there." "Is that chair not being used? Good. Let Michelle sit on it."

As you might expect, the product traveled a rather convoluted



path on its journey through the plant. In addition, a number of work stations were less than effectively designed. For example, because of the let's-use-the-chairs-we-happen-to-have principle, some workers were required to hold their hands too high or droop their heads too low while working, leading to painful necks and backs long before the end of their shifts. Because of the tuck-it-where-you-find-a-space principle of machine placement, workers had to be careful not to bump into one another as they moved boxes of plugs back and forth through the plant.

It wasn't difficult to identify any number of inefficiencies in machine placement, as well as job design and other ergonomic errors. For example, a long ceramic furnace had been installed just inside the entrance to one factory building—the wrong way around. As a result, raw materials had to be trucked into the factory all the way to the other end—the front end—of the furnace, while items coming out of the furnace had to be trucked all the way back to arrive at the next production point.

Was this an unusual situation? Far from it. That's why instruction should never be prescribed before analyzing the circumstances leading someone to say, "They need training." No matter where one goes in the world of work, one can find these and other job design errors which, if corrected, will make the work easier, more efficient, less tiring or painful, and/or safer—without requiring any training at all.

From then on I began seeing obstacles and mismatches everywhere I turned. I'd walk down the street and see a street vendor who could sell more products if he rearranged his wares. I'd note the inefficiency of using live ticket-takers in the French subway when an automated turnstile would hasten travelers on their way. (When I asked about that practice, I learned it was a way for the French government to provide gainful employment for pensioners. Oops! I'd jumped to a fine conclusion from a faulty premise.) As mentioned earlier, I saw obstacles to learning in every classroom and every textbook. Why didn't others see what I saw? Perhaps they did, but were far more relaxed about the disjoints than I.



Translators aren't interpreters

On several occasions, I had to make a presentation through a simultaneous interpreter. It is a humbling experience revealing how badly we communicate, even when speaking English to English-speaking audiences.

Typically, the interpreter assembled her portable booth at the back of the classroom, strung wires and headsets, and otherwise prepared for two-way language communication. I, for example, would speak in English, and the interpreter would exchange my words for those in the target language, while at the same time trans-culturating vocabulary and examples. All in real time!

Unless you speak the target language (and why use an interpreter if you do?), your success or failure is entirely in her hands. In plain language, if she doesn't like you, or if you piss her off, or treat her like furniture, you're dead. All she has to do is relax her vigilance to make a shambles of your presentation. Treat her right, though, and your success is all but assured.

A good interpreter can save your hide in other ways. For example, when I was asked to conduct a seminar for South American bankers in Washington, D.C., I met with the interpreter over breakfast before the meeting (by then I'd learned that not to do so could be the kiss of death). It was a good thing I did. She indicated that customs followed by South Americans during seminars were a bit different from ours. She explained:

"You'll present your first lecture, after which everybody will get up and leave the room."

"W-h-a-a-t?"

"Yes. They will go somewhere down the hall and caucus."

"Caucus?"

"Yes. They will discuss, and possibly argue, about what you told them. They will then return to the classroom, and someone will stand up and report. You will then be invited to deliver your next lecture."

Which is exactly what happened. Imagine how you'd feel if you didn't know what was coming, and suddenly your entire audience



got up and left!

Fortunately, someone had taken me aside and confided the etiquette of dealing with interpreters. That kindness allowed me to be well-received where others—brilliant though they may have been—failed. Here's what you need to know:

First, never refer to an interpreter as a translator. *Translators* are highly skilled people who exchange the words of one language for those of another. That's difficult enough. *Interpreters*, on the other hand, do that and more; they select words, phrases, expressions and examples that will make your meaning clear in the target language and culture . . . and they do it in real time.

Second, always refer to your interpreter by name. It's common courtesy. If you're not sure how to pronounce it, ask. She'll be flattered by your interest.

Third, *always* try to arrange *private* time with your interpreter before your presentation. This will signal your respect for her as a person, give her a chance to hear the analogies and special terminology you will be using, and let her become accustomed to the sound of your voice and pronunciations. It can save you from certain death. While meeting with an interpreter in West Berlin, she explained that Germans reserve the word "behavior" to refer to the behavior of lower animals, not including humans. That single insight was enough to save me a great deal of embarrassment.

Humor can be another trap. What's funny in one culture isn't necessarily funny in another. If you hope to get a laugh for your hilarious anecdote, allow the interpreter an opportunity to find words that will push your humor into the target language. Don't even think of trying to tell a funny story without pre-testing it with your interpreter. If you do, disaster lurks.

There was an important lesson to be gleaned from these experiences with interpreters: It's much easier to talk than to communicate. It's difficult enough to communicate in one's own language. But when an interpreter stands between you and your listener, the problem of "getting through" is magnified.



Experiences with interpreters helped improve my “getting through” skills, and my attempts to navigate several European cultures led me to a deep appreciation of the importance of testing my written work before publication. Ever since, I’ve not published anything that hasn’t been subjected to extensive tryouts on the intended audience. They’re not always easy on the ego, but they guarantee I’ll be understood better than had the tryouts not occurred. Besides, wouldn’t you rather find out what’s wrong with your written and spoken communications *before* they go out into the world?

A mind stretcher

The European experience definitely stretched my mind, especially because work and travel spanned several countries and as many cultures. It was well worth the effort, though, as it reinforced the perception that performance problems are pretty much the same the world over. They’re expressed in different languages and wrapped in different cultures, but they’re the same. And why not? The laws of nature and principles of behavior are universal—they operate whether we like it or not. It’s that insight that allowed me to enter totally unfamiliar environments (brewery, gold mine, spark plug factory, etc.), confident I could find a way to be of service.