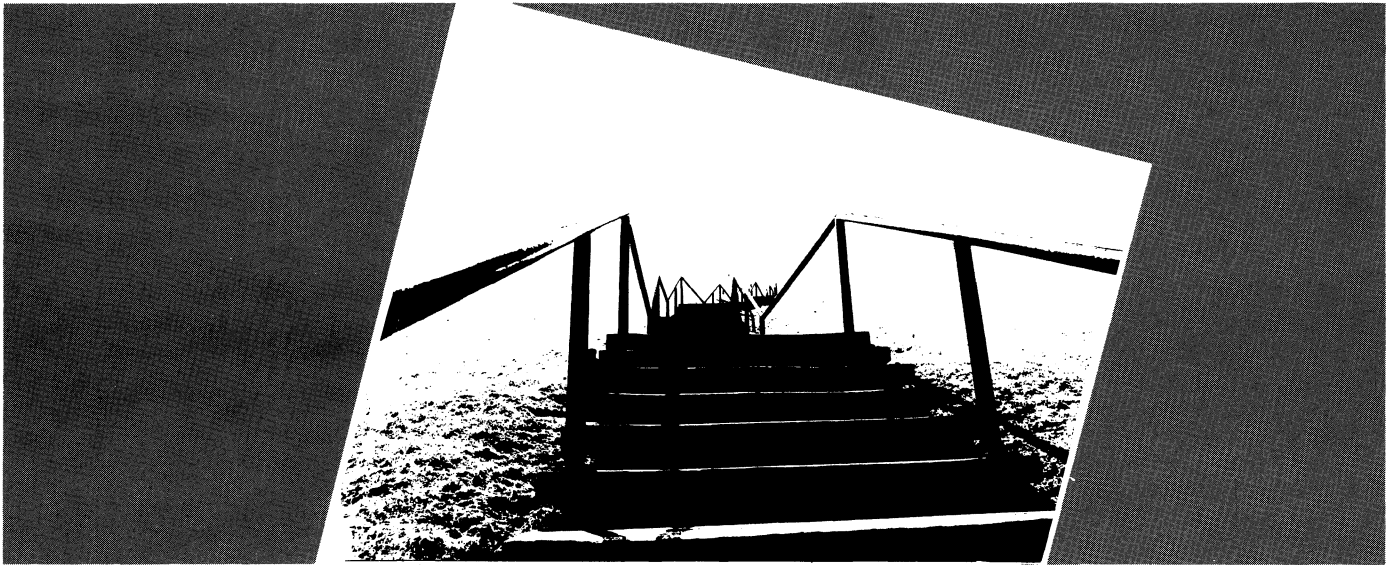


More Than Just a Course

Joyce Denyer and Helen LaFontaine



Dans cet article intitulé “Plus Qu’un Cours”, l’auteur décrit comment les ateliers d’action positive peuvent aider les femmes dans leurs carrières.

One by one, the women enter. We offer them coffee and continue to distribute paper, pens and ashtrays. By 9 a.m. twenty women are waiting for the workshop to begin. Most are strangers to each other. All are strangers to us. We will spend three days together and we will discover that many of the women are strangers even to themselves. We will know that the workshop was successful if another kind of meeting has taken place—that between a woman and the abilities and aspirations she has kept hidden from herself.

Over the past four years we have faced many rooms of twenty women. Most often we share three days of their lives; sometimes only half a day. Twice we have led five-day residential workshops. No matter how much or how little time, it is never enough. Yet something profound always happens.

The women come from business, government, and unions. They represent support staff, first-line and middle management, and the professions. Usually organizational levels are not mixed, but once both managers and support staff attended the same session with excellent results.

We have conducted these programs for women in every major Canadian city from St John’s to Vancouver. We teach Career Planning, Management and Leadership Skills, Time Management, and Assertiveness. Always we learn from the women and always we are awed by their strength, candour and talent. What we have wanted to know is the long-term effects of an intense but very brief experience. How much learning can take place in three days? For how long will it be retained? What of the woman who writes, ‘These three days have changed my life,’ on an evaluation? Will she still feel that way when a year has passed? To answer these questions we contacted participants from several different workshops held over the past eighteen months. The organizations represented are Centennial College, CBC, the Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations, and the National Indian Brotherhood.

Much is now known about the process of change: that individuals and institutions cannot initiate change in themselves, ex-

cept superficially; and that what Dr. Morris E. Massey calls a ‘Significant Emotional Event’ is essential if change is to occur at the level of deeply-felt ‘gut’ values.

We believe that our role as facilitators is to provide the two parts of this equation for change. First, we are external to the organization that is our client. Participants quickly realize that we are not apologists for their employers, and a first level of trust is established. Our method of working is to share our selves and our experiences. This enables the women to be equally open with us and with each other. It also promotes and fosters a deep trust between leaders and participants. We are convinced that this environment of honesty and mutual trust would not develop were we of the organization itself.

The second part of the equation is workshop content and structure. The first day is directed toward looking inward. Few women have spent even one minute thinking and talking about who they are or who and what they might be. Knowing that women’s socialization is ‘other-directed’, we ask them to accept the importance and validity of their own needs, abilities and ambitions. To discover that it is truly permissible to be concerned with the self is the first significant emotional event which makes the workshop a potentially life-changing experience. One participant who had faithfully internalized society’s value expectations for women told us, ‘I’ve always put others first. I had never thought of myself like this before. You know, I really do a good job. I have a lot to offer. I just wish I’d had this experience ten years ago.’

Content the second day focuses outward. The women work on skills acquisition in pairs and in small groups. By the third afternoon every woman will present some portion of content to the whole group. Encouragement, understanding, and applause greet each presentation. One final task remains. We ask each woman to speak about herself for two minutes and only in positive terms. A simple enough request—but to comply means the breaking down of injunctions that women have lived by since childhood. Don’t begin a sentence with ‘I’ and don’t boast, women are told; compliments are paid to others, not to yourself. Some women have wept as they struggled to say the unfamiliar but valid and positive things about themselves. For others, the release from this restriction is so complete that they express a need to continue ‘for hours’. One

woman wrote on her evaluation, 'This is the first time in my life anyone has said anything nice about me. I'm glad I did it.'

That a woman finds this exercise wrenchingly difficult but participates in it nonetheless demonstrates that she has experienced gut-level attitudinal change. Not only does she value herself more but she does so publicly—and thereby she has achieved a major goal of her workshop involvement.

As the women share their experiences we are constantly amazed by the range of feeling they express and the courage they display. Statistics show that forty per cent of working women are in the sole-support category and that pay disparities are growing. They tell nothing, however, of the human condition behind the data. What is it really like to work full time, care for a family, and carry this responsibility alone? The stories are funny, poignant, and sometimes tragic. They add a further dimension to the workshops and serve to persuade other women to take a careful and long-range look at their career and life plans. Indeed, some women begin to think in terms of 'career' rather than 'job' solely because of what they learn from fellow participants.

Ad hoc mutual support systems established in the workshops flourish to this day. 'A small group of us get together for lunch and discuss things. We help one another. If I have a problem now, it just seems easier.' Other women continue to meet in order to practise the skills they learned in the workshop. They prepare each other for job interviews, then gather to celebrate or console each other. Through an information-sharing process, they develop the job-related networks men have long found useful to career advancement.

Group support is essential. However, women who have been socialized to see themselves in the framework of their relationship with their spouses or children need to discover their value as separate and unique persons as well. One workshop participant had been recently widowed after a good marriage of twenty years. She had not been employed during that time and now faced a working life of more than fifteen years. The children who had filled her life were ready to leave home. The future she had counted on was radically altered. What she learned in the workshop, she said, was respect for her ability

to survive, to cope, to enjoy, and to take the risk of reaching out for new experiences—alone.

It is difficult to define a successful workshop and even more difficult to assess its long-range impact. Several participants have been promoted, some to senior positions. If that is a criterion, then what of the women who have examined their life and work values and decided that they do not aspire to a career in management? Managers from our client organizations report that women who have been participants are more productive, more highly motivated. But we also know of participants who have left their jobs following a workshop. One lives now in a commune where she is writing and illustrating books of poetry for children.

Is it not a measure of success that groups of twenty women come together to discuss and discover their common concerns as women in the workforce or in life itself? As the women express their fears, dreams and anger, each is relieved to find that her feelings are valid and shared by the other members of the group. It is clear that women are bonding together in the ways that Lionel Tiger said were possible only for men.

As well, participants learn pragmatic skills that are of benefit to them and to their employers. 'I spoke to my boss about getting my position reclassified and my intention of taking up further studies. He was just too willing to help me and give me advice. I realized it is not only during the job interview that you need to sell yourself and let them know what you know, what you have and what you want. When you're already on the job, you'll still have to remind them and say you want more—to go further.'

Perhaps the most important learning, the one that lasts over time and is the genesis of all the life changes that follow, is what each woman learns about herself and other women. 'I feel that the three-day experience was more than just a course. It was a total and complete look at one's life, a deciding period in which we all had an enormous choice to make—either remaining the same or BEING and DOING something important with the only life we will ever have. I now believe that women WILL unite. We will become one of the world's strongest forces, both in business and in the power of our opinions.'

