



## ANALOGIES FOR TRAINING TECHNICAL INFORMATION

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*Stories (analogies) in one form or another have been used by human beings for countless ages as a means of transmitting messages through associations. Examples of such "stories" including epic poems (Homer), fables (Aesop), parables (The Bible), yarns (Paul Bunyan), and fairy tales (Mother Goose), to mention a few, have been used to convey a message about a particular situation or problem.*

Recently, this method of communication has been increasingly and purposely used in training and/or sales presentations. The primary objective of this article is to provide information concerning the effectiveness and proper application of analogies in technical sales training, specifically related to group diversity.

The successful training of technical information with a group of sales representatives should include an awareness of a number of distinguishing variables. Such variables include differences in educational background, sales experience, race, nationality, sex, and geographic location. Of the above-mentioned variables, previous educational background and industry-related sales experience are the two which may be considered most important in presenting technical information to classes of new representatives. Obviously, both of these factors impact on the interest, comprehension, and retention of any technical information, and subsequently the success of the training program.

Since product knowledge, of both one's own and the competition's products, is an essential component in selling in a technically-oriented market, it is necessary that sales trainers convey the product information in a most competent manner. Thus one of the primary goals of the sales trainer is to maximize the comprehension, interest, and retention of as many of the trainees as possible. When one

considers the above-mentioned isolated variables, it is obvious that this goal is extremely challenging, because a trainer must now present technically-oriented information which is neither too involved for the novice, nor too simplistic for the veteran. The trick is to maintain the interest and contribution of the entire class, as opposed to a selected segment of the class.

Before examining the implementation of analogies as a means for inclusion of all members of a sales training class, it is necessary to describe two commonly used techniques for technical information training. One well-used method which addresses the issue of presenting technical information entails identification of the lowest common denominator that exists in a sales class. This is most effective for individuals who have the least amount of related education or previous experience. However, the drawback to this method is that it jeopardizes the interest and contribution of those individuals with advanced education or experience. In addition, it compromises the perceived qualifications and sophistication of the trainer. Conversely, by presenting material solely in a technical manner, a trainer will risk losing the attention of the less educated and experienced individuals. They most likely will interpret this information as being over their heads, if not esoteric. Thus both of these methods are directed toward specific groups in a class, and fail to include all of the trainees.

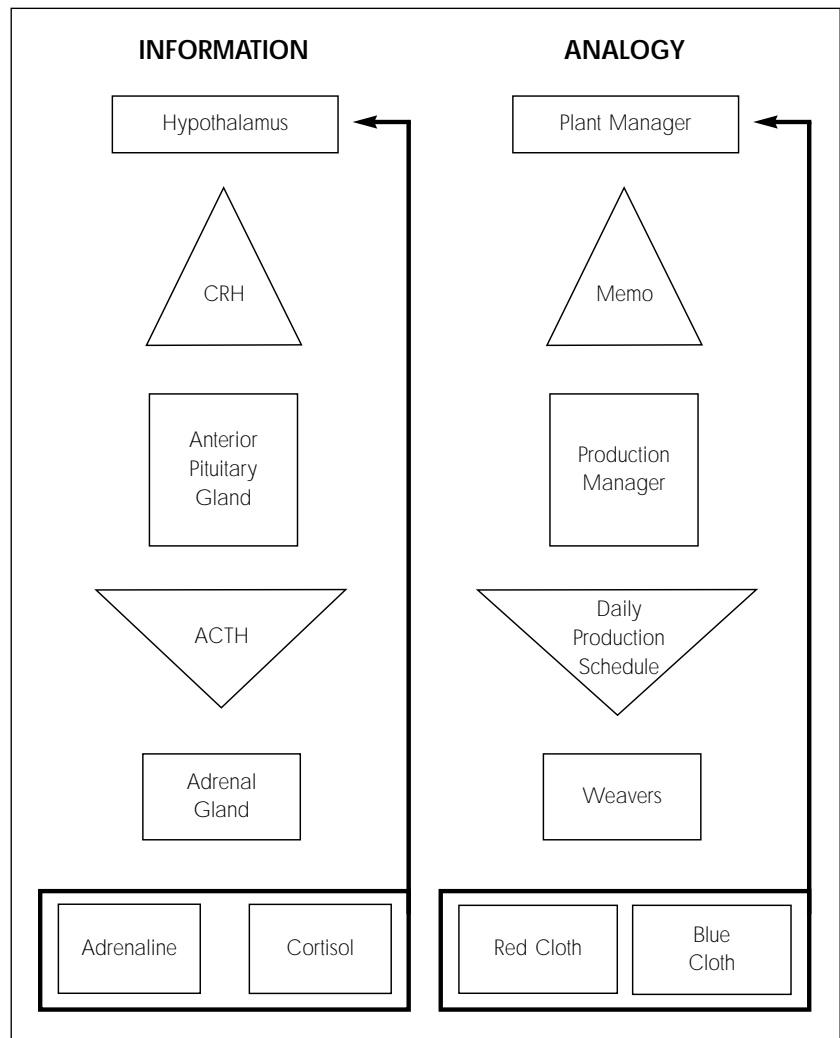
**By definition, an analogy or metaphor can be described as the use of a specific term or action to describe another term or action because of some similarity between them or because of their relations to other things.**

Through the use of analogies, a trainer can present technical information which is both interesting to the more skilled individuals and not too complicated for the novice. This strategy avoids the obvious pitfalls which were mentioned above. By definition, an analogy or metaphor can be described as the use of a specific term or action to describe another term or action because of some similarity between them or because of their relations to other things. An analogy can be presented in the form of a story or an example with the intention of instructing or advising the listener, therefore creating a metaphor. Metaphors and analogies are similar in that they offer either an explicit or an implicit comparison. One major difference is that the metaphor generally involves a story that has a point of conflict which is dramatized, then resolved. By contrast, an analogy is a simple comparison and is often expressed in a statement rather than a story.

For example, our medical training includes teaching about the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, a system which is very technical and not typically understood and retained by most trainees. For this reason a very simple analogy is utilized. Initially a description of this system is provided

using the specific technical jargon. That is, the hypothalamus monitors normally occurring steroids and hormones in the body. Once there is a detection of a need for additional steroids, the hypothalamus releases a hormone called, *corticotropin releasing hormone* (CRH). This substance stimulates the anterior pituitary gland to release a second hormone called, *adrenocorticotrophic hormone* (ACTH) which via the bloodstream, reaches the adrenal gland to increase the synthesis and release of *glucocorticoid hormones* (adrenaline and cortisol).

The next step is to take this information and create an analogy which accurately explains the physiologic activity.



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Typically this sounds as follows:

The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis is like a process found in textile manufacturing companies. The plant manager at ABC Textile Manufacturing, Inc. receives a computer printout informing him that the present inventory of red and blue cloth is insufficient to meet sales needs. Immediately the plant manager sends a memo to the production manager informing him of the situation and requesting that the inventory return to the appropriate levels. The production manager fills out the daily production schedule specifying how much red and blue cloth needs to be produced. Upon receiving the daily production schedule the weavers begin producing red and blue cloth. At the end of the day the plant manager checks inventory levels and adjusts production levels accordingly.

Although this comparison is somewhat simplistic, it provides those less educated, less experienced individuals an enjoyable opportunity to comprehend an issue which initially appeared difficult, if not intimidating. In addition, by initially describing this information in its proper, technical jargon, you maintain the interest and contribution of the more educated and more experienced individuals. There is at least one supplemental advantage attained by employing analogies. Occasionally the more educated and more experienced individuals who are perceived as possessing sound product knowledge may not understand a specific concept. A simple analogy allows them the opportunity to grasp the information and obtain an effective comprehension level without damage to their confidence. In creating analogies, it is necessary that a trainer consider the following steps:

1. Examine the information to be presented.
2. Locate key nouns (people, places, things) in the technical information.
3. Locate key processes (verbs, adjectives, adverbs) in the technical information.
4. Select the content of the analogy (person, animal, abstract, etc.).
5. Create a key noun in the analogy for each key noun in the technical information.
6. Create a key process in the analogy for each key process in the technical information.
7. Design the analogy to be interesting and to provide a desired response.

It is necessary that the utilization of an analogy be structured properly. It is important that the key nouns and processes (verbs) in the analogy are parallel to those in the technical information. By simply listing the principals, as shown above, a sales trainer can ensure competent application as well as effective comprehension.

Like the hypothalamus in the above-mentioned analogy, a trainer of technically oriented information is providing directives, specifically, on how to sell a company product. If the message is poorly comprehended, the trainee is less likely to maintain interest. Consequently, there is inadequate comprehension and retention, and the finished product, selling ability, is severely compromised. On the other hand, when technical information is presented in an enjoyable manner which is easily comprehended and retained, you maximize the interaction of the members of the class. In this way, product knowledge, which is a major component of competent selling, is optimized, and the finished product, sales ability, is greatly enhanced. In essence, analogies are extremely powerful instruction tools when they are well structured and properly executed in technical sales training.