



TRAINING MEDIA REVIEW *by trainers, for trainers*

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ABOUT THE STAR RATINGS

Outstanding	4
Very good	3.5
Good	3
Above average	2.5
Average	2
Below average	1.5
Poor	1

TRAINING MEDIA REVIEW provides objective reviews of training content and supporting technologies, advice on media-related training issues, research reports, and consulting.

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TMR REPRINT FREE RADICALS

OBJECTIVE REVIEWS AND RESEARCH @ WWW.TMREVIEW.COM

FREE RADICALS, VHS/DVD, 2005, 70 min., Star Thrower (800-242-3220, www.starthrower.com), \$695. Leader guide, workbook, handouts, PowerPoint slides.

By Bill Ellet

Can you teach innovation? Probably not.

However, you can encourage people to think innovatively and create conditions that support them. For instance, here's a radical idea: provide people with incentives. The simplest incentive is to pay people to be innovative. Have you ever seen a job description that includes innovation as part of the job? You've no doubt seen a thousand mundane types of behavior dignified with a mention in job descriptions. Then why should innovation merely be a byproduct or implied outcome of other incentive-encouraged behavior such as "oversee the timely development, manufacturing, and marketing of products with a proven market need"?

Taking a narrow view of innovation is dangerous. Innovation in tangible things like logic boards, food packaging, and automobiles is important but hardly exhausts the possibilities. Innovation is far more expansive; its subject can be people or processes or prices.

Prices, you ask? Look at what Wal-Mart did to the pricing of a huge range of goods. Innovative pricing helped the company become a retail juggernaut, inspiring an almost slavish loyalty as well as fear and loathing. Apple's online music store, iTunes, sells songs and pieces of larger musical works for 99 cents each. That price has helped changed the way people purchase and listen to music.

WHAT'S IN IT?

Many of the ideas I've just discussed are given spirited attention in *Free Radicals*, a VHS and DVD training program. True to its subject, *Free Radicals* innovates on the training genre. The video is offered in two ways: one continuous show of nearly 70 minutes and the show split into nine stand-alone segments, with separate clips for the major exercises. The design allows maximum flexibility in the use of the video content.

A training video that tops an hour breaks the rule of the genre, which states that no program will run longer than 20 minutes tops. But this show isn't meant to be watched beginning to end without stirring from one's seat. It is broken up with learning activities such as the provocative nine-dots exercise. I will tell you frankly that the exercise drove me crazy and, at the same time, humbled me.



The exercise is simple: just join the nine dots arranged in three parallel lines (click here to view a PDF of the worksheet) with a single continuous line. I reflexively thought there was one mathematically precise solution and went into a kind of grim mental lockdown to discover the “right” way. I won’t spoil the exercise for you by saying anything more than this: the exercise can reveal how insidious conventional thinking is.

The thrust of the program is to jolt individuals out of their default thought settings. But it also addresses other ways to encourage innovation such as the makings of an innovative culture. Robert Newhart, CEO of the Innovation Center (<http://www.innovationcenter.org/>), hosts the video with enthusiasm. Interwoven are talking head contributions from 50 experts, who are nice mix of practitioners from different industries, with a few dreamers and media folks thrown in for good measure. There are no academics present, talking about theoretical structures. The program does have some trademarked concepts and frameworks, but the number is kept judiciously small—and they’re actually helpful.

Besides the video, the other program elements are a DVD with support materials and PowerPoint slides, a leader guide, and a participant workbook. The many PowerPoint slides cover all the major concepts and exercises in the video. You can create your own custom presentation by selecting the slides you want and then dropping the appropriate video clips right into the PowerPoint show. You can’t get much more flexible than that.

The print collateral is well done, and the leader guide is crucial for this program. The downside of flexibility is the work of deciding what to use and how to put it together. The leader guide gets you started with several suggested combinations and provides outlines for group sessions addressing the major concepts presented in the video.

HOW GOOD IS IT?

People who know their stuff and have taught it many times have developed Free Radicals. I say that not because that’s what it says in the press release about the product but because the expertise and experience are clearly reflected in the product’s design and execution. The content is thorough, provocative, and enjoyable, and every piece of the program package is useful. It’s a great bargain for the price announced at the release date; even if the price goes up subsequently, the value will still be substantial.

This is not a turnkey program. You aren’t going to show the 70 minutes of video and then read from the script in the leader guide. Free Radicals demands considerable forethought and preparation—and that could be a deterrent for people looking for a quick solution that doesn’t take much time. I think the program would best be delivered by a manager or team leader, with the trainer serving as a consultant.

I have a few criticisms, but they’re minor. The video drags at times with all the experts. They are articulate and smart, but in some segments, there are just too many talking heads. More could be said about the challenge of creating a culture of innovation. That is a huge task far beyond the capability or control of most managers, but it may be possible to create “microclimates” within an organization that nurture innovative thinking.

RECOMMENDATION

The opening segment of Free Radicals is “Innovate or Die”—the same title Tom Peters used for a video in 1997. The imperative isn’t true, at least not always (a lot of profoundly unimaginative organizations somehow survive), but ignoring it sure heightens the risk of death by inertia. You can’t teach innovative thinking, but you can increase the chances that it will take place in your organization. One way to do that—a very good way—is to invest in this product.

Bill Ellet (wellet@tmreview.com) is editor of *Training Media Review*.

Free Radicals product rating

CATEGORY	
Holds viewer interest	3.5
Acting/Presenting	3.5
Production quality	4
Value of content	4
Instructional value	4
Value for the money	4
Documentation	4
Overall rating	4