

# Business and the New Age Movement

## A Symposium

The goal of this symposium, convened by the American Family Foundation on November 23, 1987 at the American Management Association Building in New York City, was to improve understanding of how New Age thought and training programs affect the business community. AFF also wanted to examine widespread allegations that some New Age programs employ damaging cultic techniques of persuasion and control. The symposium, which brought together expert observers of the New Age Movement (see page 4 for sketches of the presenters), addressed three basic questions: What is the New Age movement? How does the New Age movement affect business? How should business respond to the New Age movement?

### Philosophical Bases

Professor Carl Raschke, from the University of Denver, opened the symposium by saying that the New Age movement, which underpins and guides the practices of many of the training schemes now being sold to industry, aims to radically transform American society. New Age thought, according to Professor Raschke, has an affinity with a number of well-known traditions: the millennial religious-political vision of the seventeenth-century Puritan Commonwealth; the mystical and occult views, represented by Theosophy, for example, prominent in late nineteenth-century America; the utopian socialism of St. Simone and Fourier during the same century; the humanistic psychology, New Left, and human potential movements of recent decades, which have based hopes of social change on development of self-perfection; Eastern religious ideas about the oneness of the universe and identity of God and man; and the popular mystical thinking of the eighties, characterized by astrology, "channeling," and kindred practices. This New Age thought, at once religious and political, says Professor Raschke, holds essentially that our badly failing economic and social systems must be changed through the development of a "sharing and caring" consciousness, a new way of looking at reality, a new system of relationships among management, employees, and other factors of production. Professor Raschke also thinks that the New Age prescription for the fulfillment of this vision, with its emphasis on "we" (the converted) versus "they" (outsiders), is totalitarian.

### "Thought Reform Programs"

Dr. Margaret Singer, of the University of California (Berkeley), next argued that many of the new training schemes, which she indicated are take-offs on large, New Age group awareness programs such as "est" (now The Forum) and Lifespring, are basically "thought reform programs" that can harm employees and engender lawsuits. Training based on New Age principles, Dr. Singer said, is essentially the updating of age-old techniques of social and psychological "influence"



Mr. Jeremy Main, a member of the Board of Editors of Fortune Magazine, and author of "Trying to Bend Managers' Minds" (Fortune, Nov. 23, 1987), speaking at the AFF symposium, "Business and the New Age Movement," which took place in late November at the American Management Association Building in New York City.

designed to create "deployable" people. The result, she adds, is that the majority of trainees experience varying degrees of alienation and anomie because they were urged to give up old norms, goals, and ideals. They also suffer "culture shock" as they try to reconcile pre-training values both with what they learned in the training and with the realities of their post-training existence. Importantly, a small number of trainees will be more seriously harmed, demonstrating conditions such as: reactive schizo-affective psychoses; post-traumatic stress disorder (exemplified by a woman who was induced in training to re-experience her life in a Nazi camp); atypical dissociative disorders, which stem from the difficulty in accepting new theories of causality and reality; relaxation-induced anxiety; and miscellaneous reactions, including phobias, cognitive

### Advice to Managers

**[** Professor Richard Ofshe, of the University of California (Berkeley), suggested that potential consumers of New Age training programs ask and answer two questions before proceeding: "Do you believe in magic?" and "What did your mother tell you about responding to strangers?" If a manager answers "no" to the first question, he is then able to ask about and get satisfactory answers to inquiries about the theory behind the training in question, about how the claimed outcome is supposed to be effected. Something is wrong if the trainer cannot answer these questions; sometimes the explanation will be irrational enough to forewarn against purchase. Managers should note, said Professor Ofshe, that low-level training in some schemes may appear harmless, but later training may well include psychologically harmful exercises. Clearly, he emphasized, managers must know exactly the content and style of the proposed training.

As to mother's advice about strangers, Professor Ofshe warned managers to beware of promises to increase productivity dramatically. Pacific Bell's experience with the Krone training is a case in point (and all potential consumers should, he added, read the California Utilities Commission's report on the matter). Pacific Bell made a \$7-8 million annual investment in Krone without any objective evaluation after early pilots. Performance measures were late and selective (in order adequately to explain the fiasco to the PUC). The decision to let the contract to Krone was not businesslike, but based simply on the fact that a powerful manager thought it would be good. In the end, according to Professor Ofshe, Pacific Bell's \$160 million investment brought the company the mundane insight that the language people use conditions the way they think, the appointment of 500 "thought police" to ensure that the training language was used and training concepts assimilated, the widespread feeling among employees that it was a worthless program which was jammed down their throats and which made communication even more difficult. There was no evidence of positive gain from the training. Professor Ofshe ended by warning that companies could be debilitated by splits between those who supported and those who opposed the radical philosophical and attitudinal changes which New Age training programs often demanded.

### Be Open But Alert

Mr. Perry Pascarella, Editor in Chief of *Industry Week*, said that he saw aspects of New Age thought already reflected by America's managers. Faced with declining productivity and increased competition, they believe that the old system of hierarchy and control will no longer work. In order to release the latent but stunted creativity in their organizations, they are willing to consider that there is a context in which the

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*Panelists at the New Age and Business Symposium (left to right): Professor Richard Ofshe, University of California (Berkeley); Herbert L. Rosedale, Esq., Parker Crupin, Flatau & Klimpl (New York City); Richard Waring, Personnel Director, Budget Rent a Car; and Perry Pascarella, Editor-in-Chief, Industry Week.*

firm should operate that goes beyond the old organizational boundaries. Thus, the increasing talk by managers, says Mr. Pascarella, about greater spirituality, unity, and cooperation in organizations, about breakthroughs in ways of looking at themselves and the people with whom they work, and against the "scientific" management mindset. But, Mr. Pascarella, added, while managers are looking for creative changes at the top, they are not also looking for the creation of robots at the bottom.

The *Industry Week* editor then suggested several questions to ask when evaluating a training scheme: "Is it aimed at making me feel good about myself or about others, so I can help them? Does it serve people or try to change them? Does it invite inquiry or simply present solutions? Does it serve people or try to change them?" He said that while managers should consider taking certain New Age trainings themselves, they should not insist that others do so. Personally, Mr. Pascarella would ask his superiors to take a course, but not require his subordinates to do so. He concluded by asking the symposium to be open-minded about New Age training possibilities. "Some work, he said, and some do not, some are manipulative, and some are not.

### Pragmatic Evaluation Needed

Mr. Richard Waring, personnel director for Budget Rent a Car, believes that business should respond to the New Age movement the way it does to other external forces over which it has no control, which is to say by investigating, evaluating, and managing what he characterized as the inherent dangers in the promotion of New Age transformation.