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Page One Feature

On Transocean Rigs, Sensitivity Training Pays Off; Blue-Yellow Meets Red-Green

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NEW ORLEANS -- Jimmy Nobles has worked on offshore oil rigs for 25 years and still vividly remembers how cramped living conditions and tyrannical bosses used to fray nerves.

The result: shouting matches and even the occasional fight.

Not anymore, at least on **Transocean Sedco Forex** rigs, says Mr. Nobles, a burly 50-year-old dressed in blue company coveralls at a Transocean training session here. "It's a different deal," he says, spitting tobacco juice into an empty Coke can. "We care about other people's feelings."



Jimmy Nobles

Indeed, roustabouts, never known for wearing their emotions on their sleeves, are being asked to wear them on stickers on their hard hats. The stickers have the words, "START TO UNDERSTAND ME," and next to that, two colored dots, which are supposed to tell co-workers about the personality under the hat.

For instance, "yellows and blues are touchy. They like to touch and hug, no problem. Greens don't like that," explains Mr. Nobles, who now teaches "well-control" classes at a company technical school. He's a combination red-yellow and says it fits. "Reds are driven," but his yellow side shows up in his fondness for people, he explains, slapping a visitor on the back.

Businesses have long used sensitivity training and popular psychology to help employees and managers work together. With the help of a Minneapolis company called Inscape Publishing, some are taking the effort to a new level, labeling workers with colors or letters in the name of team-building and getting along.

Assembly-line workers in Kentucky, police officers in Kansas, electricians in Texas and construction crews in Florida have all been assigned letters as a way to assess their styles and their colleagues' behavior. Carpenters and plumbers in New York City use the same system.

Inscape, a closely held company, sells the training as \$15 "personal profile" tests through about 5,000 distributors. The program draws on work published by Harvard-trained psychologist William Moulton Marston. His 1928 tome, "Emotions of Normal People," begins: "Are you a 'normal person?' Probably, for

the most part, you are. Doubtless, however, you have occasional misgivings." Dr. Marston is better known in psychology circles, however, for his unscrupulous promotion of an early lie detector during the Lindbergh kidnapping trial. He and his machine appeared in magazine ads for razors, and he advocated the use of lie detectors in marriage counseling. Later in life, he created the comic-book heroine Wonder Woman.

Based on 28 multiple-choice questions, a person going through Inscape's "DISC" training is assigned a letter -- D for dominance, I for influence, S for steadiness or C for conscientiousness -- that best describes his personality.

Tommy Curtiss, a project manager at S&J Electric in Fort Worth, Texas, says he is a hard-charging D, something akin to a Transocean red. After going through training with his workers, he says, he now understands that a co-worker who is a C (the green sticker on Transocean rigs) needs clear organization. "I can see how his little world is set up," says Mr. Curtiss, amid a tangle of electric cable and cement molds. S&J workers don't wear their letters after their training, but groups are small, and everybody seems to remember who's what.

Gordon Culley, a carpenter-on-call for Installinc, a New York City online service that sends tradesmen out on jobs, is a C. He says the most useful part of the training wasn't understanding himself, but figuring out how to treat everyone else. If he comes across a customer who's a talkative I, for instance, "I will explain the world."

Getting to Know You

Transocean, the offshore driller, has taken the training a step further, using colors instead of letters. It says it started the training a few years ago to help middle managers communicate better. Now it's standard for the company's 8,300 workers world-wide. The company says it helps people get along better, especially in the stressful and sometimes-dangerous environment of an offshore oil rig.

It's also providing a little glue to a company still figuring out how to integrate corporate cultures after a string of acquisitions, says Lewis Senior, Transocean's manager for health, safety and the environment. "We're trying to get into people's minds and hearts," he says.

Mr. Senior's booming voice still carries the lilt of his native Yorkshire, England, despite 27 years on offshore rigs. He helped design Transocean's colors training, borrowing liberally from DISC, popular psychology and business self-help books.

In the no-frills conference room of a New Orleans Best Western hotel, he addresses a class of 45: "Every single thing you do is a reflection of your colors." To start off the day's session, he asks the group to draw a few pictures, including the sun, a snake and a house.

Me, Not Me

"The more windows you have, the more open you are," Mr. Senior tells the group after they've put down their pencils. Then, another test. Presented with 28 sets of four words, each worker picks a word that describes him best and a word that describes him least. A typical set: fussy, obedient, firm, playful. The test takers are told how to score themselves and come up with their two colors.

Rig workers wear their dots on their hats, while landlubbers post theirs outside their office doors. While no

one is forced to display his colors, Mr. Senior contends that "people who don't buy into it" walk away. Some question whether the program is an intrusion. Says Tim Callais, a Transocean adviser for operational safety: "They're probably blue people."

"Behavioral Styles" charts are posted on the gray bulkheads of many of Transocean's rigs, explaining that people with blue in them dislike change and can be a little wishy-washy. Yellows are emotional and talkative. Greens are cautious and serious, while reds tend to be strong-willed and decisive.

Thom Keeton, a red-green rig manager, keeps a color chart under the glass covering his desk for quick reference. If a crew member was "a blue-yellow, he wouldn't come to the point," the 46-year-old Alabama native says. "He'd say, 'Hey, have you been fishing? Oh, by the way, No. 6 engine has just slung a rod.'"

Tom Watkins, a tool pusher and a senior hand on the Discoverer Spirit, Transocean's latest drill ship, is also a red-green. Blunt and to the point, he doesn't like to talk much. "No granola here," he says, hurrying back to finish supervising a job.

On the Spirit's mess decks, 27-year-old David Gray, a blue-yellow, chats more freely. He's a little more laid-back, he says, but he can deal with those high-strung red-greens now that he has figured out that he just has to get to the point more quickly.

J. Michael Talbert, the company's chief executive officer, declines to divulge his own colors, saying that as CEO he has to be a bit of a chameleon. "I can be whatever color I want to be," he says.

Not so, says Mr. Senior, the Transocean instructor, who confides, "He's actually a green-blue." That might describe a guy who is organized and reserved, according to Transocean's color charts. After announcing Transocean's latest merger a few months ago, Mr. Talbert has been acting more like one of those competitive reds, Mr. Senior explains. But, he adds, "Once the merger stuff settles down, he'll go back to green and blue."

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