

# NO ORDINARY BOOT CAMP

by Noel M. Tichy

**C**orporate Boot Camps. We've all heard about them. Many of us have lived through them. In my case, I've even invented a number of them. It's fair to say that, while some achieve their goals better than others, they're all pretty much the same. They typically focus on knowledge transfer—informing new hires, for instance, about the company's products and markets and how to access key resources in the organization. The best ones, like those at GE and Ford, do this by having the recruits work on real business problems, where intense teamwork is required to meet tight deadlines (a technique I've described elsewhere as "compressed action learning"). I've studied them all. I thought I'd seen it all.

But then I saw Trilogy University. It was 1998, and I was traveling around the country, studying corporate universities as part of a benchmarking research project on action learning. Within days of my arrival, I knew Trilogy University was a breed apart—in fact, my definition of best

practice shot out to the horizon line. I've spent hundreds of hours since then at TU, documenting its unconventional approach—and its phenomenal results. (It should be stated, by way of full disclosure, that I briefly consulted to Trilogy last year on the matter of its reorganization. But my relationship to the company and its university at this point is purely as an observer.)

Modeled after Marine Corps basic training, a corporate boot camp is designed to push new recruits to their limits. Each day offers some nearly insurmountable challenge, and the reward for overcoming it

is an even harder one the next day. It's intense and intimidating, but people emerge on the other end of the program highly confident that they are prepared for anything. They also come away with deep bonds to their fellow recruits and strong ties to the organization.

Those two goals—preparedness and bonding—are usually the whole focus of a boot camp, and achieving them is worth a great deal. That's why so many of the top-performing companies put their faith in such programs. In the mid-1980s, I ran General Electric's Crotonville leadership development center, where I led



the development of its Corporate Entry Leadership Conference, a three-day program in which new hires learn about GE's strategy, its culture, and a bit about themselves. "Old man Watson" at IBM ran them, as did Ross Perot when he founded EDS, as does Andy Grove at Intel. And for years, the commercial banks have run their commercial-lending boot camps for college hires. In the past decade, consulting firms and service organizations have dramatically increased their investments in boot camps for new recruits. Accounting giant Arthur Andersen, for instance, has a 700-bed facility in St. Charles, Illinois, which runs at capacity year-round. Many old-line industrials have also set them up because they realize that energizing new hires and engaging them in the culture is just as critical as making sure they have the technical skills to do their specific jobs.

The interesting thing about Trilogy University is that it achieves those goals and more. Much more. It also serves as the company's primary R&D engine and as its way of developing its next generation of leadership. It even succeeds as the impetus and incubator for Trilogy's strategic

thinking. How can it do all that? By now, it almost couldn't fail to, thanks to a virtuous cycle that was established early and continues to gain momentum. In the simplest terms, these things happen at TU because top leadership is on the scene and deeply engaged in it—and top leadership stays on the scene and deeply engaged in TU because these essential activities are happening there.

### Welcome to Trilogy

Trilogy University is the orientation program of Austin, Texas-based Trilogy, designed to turn the company's raw recruits—hired straight off the campuses of MIT, Stanford, U. Michigan, and the like—into highly productive contributors. Started in 1995, it is the brainchild of Trilogy's president and CEO, Joe Liemandt, and its vice president of marketing, John Price. The company has a pressing need for new-employee orientation because its growth has been extremely rapid, and the biggest drag on growth has been the difficulty of recruiting and bringing new talent up to speed. Trilogy started fast out of the gate in 1989 when Liemandt nailed a market opportunity to create "configuration software" for large manufacturers like

Hewlett-Packard and Boeing. The products these companies sell have innumerable variants, as alternative components are assembled to suit each buyer's highly specific preferences. Trilogy's software solves a huge problem traditionally faced in the selling process by allowing a salesperson with a laptop to translate a customer's needs into a workable specification. The software spots where components are incompatible, for instance, or where one part requires another, and it configures a system that will work. Then—and this is really important to those salespeople—it produces an accurate price quote on the spot.

Trilogy's breakthrough allowed it to do something most small software companies only dream of: sign up brand-name accounts like Hewlett-Packard while the product was still in its infancy. Since then, Trilogy has expanded on its original offering to launch e-commerce applications for both the buying and selling of products, and its revenues have grown to about \$200 million. Along the way, its employee base has grown 35% annually. In 2000, the company brought 450 new hires into an existing organization of 1,000.

