

How We Plan

If we are agreed that planning is important, the next thing we need to know is how to plan. The first of the following articles analyzes techniques for getting group work started. Succeeding discussions describe planning programs in a region, a city, and a county, showing how action was taken to meet particular needs and situations.

☛ *Techniques of working in groups*

Getting Started

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"AND SO THE TEACHERS had a meeting and decided . . ." "The change in our science program is the result of cooperative work by . . ." "Our new salary schedule was arrived at by democratic practices . . ." "A group of parents became interested and so they worked out . . ."

The frequency with which phrases like those are recurring in educational literature, in addresses at educational meetings, and even in casual professional conversations is both heartening and baffling. Heartening because they constitute evidence of the rapid working of a new leaven in the educational enterprise, the leaven of group endeavor toward the solution of problems. Baffling because they tell us so little about the actual processes employed.

Excellent statements of principles of action for groups engaging in planning and accomplishment activities have been made available.¹ Reports of practices which exemplify

¹ See especially Charles E. Prall and C. Leslie Cushman, *Teacher Education in Service*, pp. 442-45; Stephen M. Corey, "Principles of Cooperative Group Work," *Group Planning in Education*, pp. 131-37.

The WHY of educational planning is more commonly understood than the HOW. But certainly no program of group activity can get very far until ways of proceeding are as widely known as theories of principle. Sensing this gap in much that has been written on group planning, L. D. Haskew, executive secretary, Committee on Teacher Education, gives all his attention in this article to the concrete steps involved in organizing a group for effective and satisfying work together.

these principles have been relatively numerous, but oftentimes the reports fail to make clear the nature of the actual techniques employed. It is the purpose of this article to attempt to go behind the scenes of group endeavor and to identify some of the methods used in successful attempts to work in groups. Particularly drawn upon are the experiences of school systems and colleges which cooperated in the studies assisted by the Commission on Teacher Education.²

Five questions represent the majority of requests for aid coming to the writer during the past five years from workers with teachers:

How do we go about getting group enterprises off to a good start?

How can we make group meetings really effective?

How do we go about getting projects shaped up in definite form and then carried through?

In what ways can we evaluate our work?

What can be done to improve our ability to work in groups?

These questions constitute a strong temptation to do a masterful job of hedging, to retreat into glittering generalities. Instead, we are going to attempt to propose *some* concrete answers to just one of them, the first. In doing so, we hope to open up the field of techniques for group work and to challenge others to explore it assiduously. We want to emphasize the fact that no technique

² *The College and Teacher Education and Teacher Education in Service* are two reports of the Commission which are rich in the lore of group work.

is good in and of itself, and that naming it here merely registers the possibility that it *might* work to achieve desired objectives in a particular situation.

It is a truism to state that group work must start where the persons concerned really are. An aggregation of persons must sense a common interest to become even a potential group. As this interest becomes more specific around a particular need of which they are aware, group feeling grows. When a proposal or possibility for action to meet the need presents itself and a considerable number of persons commit themselves to that proposal or possibility, they become a planning group. If they are successful in working out a plan they want to try or see tried, they become an action group, relatively cohesive and organized. The following listing of techniques is arranged roughly upon such a continuum.

Sensing a Common Interest

Sometimes the administrative leader throws to the aggregation some problems of widespread general concern, such as a problem of welfare, and asks for its discussion and recommendation upon it; he is prepared, of course, to follow that recommendation even if he thinks it faulty. In small aggregations, informal personal requests for advice upon problems or policies directed to a large number of persons heighten the feeling of proprietorship, forerunner of common interest. Here again, the requests must be sincere.

It is possible to hold discussions, attendance upon which is voluntary, which will demonstrate common interest. The discussion topic must be live and germane—public relations of the schools, for example—and the meeting must be conducted with gusto. There are a few speakers who can communicate common interest through exhortation, but they are much more rare than would-be speakers think they are.

Frequent occasions upon which members of the aggregation can get better acquainted personally, can have fun together, seem to be particularly potent in demonstrating or arousing common interest. We're not talking about the deadly formal receptions and dinners which plague so many school systems because of custom, of course, but of informal, spontaneous social occasions where friendli-

ness and interest can prevail. Some people have used organized meetings where one part of a group describes what it is trying to do and is doing, the other portion of the group freely questioning the describers. In large aggregations, a chatty house organ has been employed to help create the feeling of belonging to a larger whole.

Focusing attention upon an outside set of facts is a technique employed by many personnel strategists. Sometimes this is done by a challenge—a forceful presentation of facts about the health of children, or of the actual outside-school activities of youth, for example. Upon other occasions, a threat is pointed out clearly—the tax rate for schools is going to be reduced if we don't convince the people in that mill village we're not snooty, let's say. It is rather important that the needs thus demonstrated be tangible and concrete, not too complex for the group with its present ability to do something about, that they have apparent personal implications for quite a few members of the aggregation. Not always can the outside stimulus be selected, however; there are occasions where it thrusts itself upon a group like an avalanche. A strike of white school students against attending school with Negroes would hardly be chosen as a desirable way to demonstrate common interest to a school faculty, but when the strike occurred it certainly served to crystallize a feeling of commonality, a feeling which is being rapidly capitalized upon.

Feelings of common interest grow slowly; attempts to force the growth are likely to backfire. Common interest among members of a large aggregation grows from clusters of common interests which develop in smaller groups, meaning that it is good strategy to work upon developing small groups first, to rely upon the voluntary type of enthusiasm rather than upon the artificially generated surface interest of a whole host of people. Finally, it must be borne in mind constantly that the best guarantee of common interest is the feeling of proprietorship and that this feeling must have foundation in fact to grow.

Defining a Concrete Need

One county-school supervisor has been very successful in employing a "contrast" technique in getting a need defined by a

group. Finding one teacher in a school who is asking for help, the supervisor starts doing something concrete with that teacher—arranging the room's reference library according to reading difficulty, for example. Other teachers soon express interest, a get-together is suggested, and a common need soon emerges.

In another school system, visits to other schools have been employed to get a selection of teachers to think for the first time about having a need in their school which can be met by common action. One principal seized upon the results of a system-wide testing program to demonstrate a need for doing something to evaluate more carefully the achievement of the objectives the school claimed to be meeting. Reports and recommendations by persons who have attended conferences, workshops, and "on-the-carpet" sessions of a school council have been used similarly.

One college got started on its first group project through an editorial in the college newspaper which aroused the ire of a few professors. Another was presented with the results of a study of graduates in a particularly compelling fashion by the alumni secretary, and the discussion which followed was skillfully led toward the emergence of a clear-cut need by a young dean who had just attended a workshop.

The foregoing illustrations are of beginnings only. How did the group go from the stimulus to the definition and acceptance of a need? In all cases, some positional leader arranged a situation which would provoke interest in and of itself. The interest was followed up quickly. The group discussions were carefully handled; the leader never seemed to be saying, "We've got to get a need defined, now." On the other hand, every suggestion that something could be done was sharpened up in some way; ready-made solutions which were thrown out were questioned by members of the group. In some cases, three or four persons were finally asked to state a need in words for the group to shoot at; in others, a blackboard was used to work out a statement of convictions, leading easily to a statement of needs. Relatively little time was allowed to lapse in getting a tentative statement down; it could be revised and defined further after work was started.

The group avoided the pitfall of projecting something too vague and complex for it to grasp immediately; the teachers interested in arrangement of reference material said, for example, "We need to get our children to use reference books better."

It is patent that the spirit is more important than the letter; that the way of doing means more than what is written down. Every beginning described above could have been used in the most authoritarian setup and each need arrived at could have been sold to or forced upon a collection of teachers by a dynamic personality who was going to direct the show anyway: "Teachers ought to work on their needs in groups; you are teachers; here are your needs; *ergo*, get going." It is the basic contention of this article that such procedure is not only undemocratic; it is downright inefficient.

Planning Attack Upon a Need

A group of teachers, made up of individuals experienced in working with groups, had volunteered to try to meet the need for a better public relations program for their high school. At the first meeting the chairman laid before them in mimeographed form outlines of three alternative proposals for procedure. Within thirty minutes that group had examined each proposal and formulated a fourth one which was adopted. One member suggested that "for our own curbing" they list the reasons why this procedure had been adopted and what they thought about changing the procedure later. By the end of the hour, tasks were defined and a working schedule arranged. This "alternative proposal" technique is highly recommended by many people with successful experience in the field, provided the group is experienced and the members know each other well.

A group of seven parents and three teachers were having their first meeting "to do something about making it safer for our children to use the streets." The chairmen opened the meeting in two minutes by stating what they were there for, in general terms, and pointing out the limitations upon the group because of its non-official status. "And now," he said, "what do we do?" So far, good. Then the fun started, with one proposal and another being thrown in, most of them wild and unrealistic. The discussion got off the

track many times, an orator got the floor, and it looked as if the meeting were doomed to failure amidst yawns and frustration. One of the three teachers spoke up: "It seems to me," she said, "that we have had some excellent leads to action develop tonight. See if this summarizes your ideas . . ." and she proceeded to lay a few proposals which she had "edited" from the discussion before the group. The chairman seized the cue, and said, "We've done about enough for one time, too. We know each other's thinking now and we have some concrete suggestions. At our meeting next Tuesday we should be able to arrive quickly at a line of action. Between now and then, Miss Roberts' summary will be mailed to each of you. Thank you for coming and for an excellent meeting. Good night."

In brief form, we may list the following as techniques for expediting the planning process:

1. Getting the need stated in concise form, holding the statement constantly before the group.

2. Undertaking an analysis of the statement of need, seeking to discover what its components—or the sub-needs—are.

3. Getting a large number of specific proposals before the group, in rapid-fire order, then collecting and classifying those proposals.

4. Seizing upon one specific proposal to meet part of a need and proceeding to work it right on through, delegating to a sub-group the exploration of the total need and possibilities for doing a more comprehensive job later.

5. Presenting the group with a prepared-in-advance listing of "tentative jobs to be done," expanding the list, and calling for getting started on one or two of the jobs. (Experienced groups, primarily.)

6. After wide-open discussion, one member of the group offering a concrete proposal for action—"Let's do this, and then this, and then this"—not to get agreement at once but to give the group something tangible around which to order its thinking.

7. Having before the group a statement of the steps in logical thinking or the elements of the scientific method.

8. Using leading questions to cause the further development of a rather hazy idea,

always emphasizing that which is concrete.

A final word may be said about the usual wide-open discussion which attends the first meeting of a group faced with a planning task. Members of the group who see pretty clearly what they think ought to be done are likely to grow impatient over what seems to be dawdling; logical thinkers tend to get bored with illogical and unprecise discussions. Yet, the rather undirected exploration can serve many good ends. Members can get to know each other, to expect certain patterns of reaction, to appreciate the limitations of their own points of view as well as those of co-workers. Particularly, such discussion gives leadership a chance to emerge, ability an opportunity to be recognized. An opening discussion need never be lost time if the participants are aware of the values which can be developed from it.

From Planning to Action

In general, the more quickly a group can become responsible for doing something definite, the more likely is the group to persist to eventual success. A variety of procedures is employed to foster immediate action, among them being the establishment of action sub-groups, the listing of jobs and calling for volunteers, the setting of due dates or a time schedule, the employment of one sub-group upon which reliance can be placed as an example for the others and setting up a schedule of progress reports.

Belief in the experimental approach is a fine precursor to getting rapid action. "Let's see," says one group member, "how about one or two of us trying to write a case history of one child and getting the rest of you to criticize it." "Would someone like to try . . . ?," says a group chairman. Or perhaps, the group itself may pitch into the planning and execution of a really careful experiment, acting as fast as the next step is apparent.

Administrators occupy a strategic position in assisting groups to clear the hurdle between planning and action. In the first place, their experience qualifies them to make proposals in terms of detailed steps to be taken, and to point out ways in which obstacles may be surmounted or avoided. Second, they can keep the routine jobs required by action programs from becoming too onerous by providing clerical assistance,

duplicating facilities, needed supplies, and the like. Third, they can remove alibis for not acting. "We should finish this questionnaire tomorrow afternoon but there's that lecture at the Central Office we are expected to attend," says a group. "Wait just a minute and I'll see if we can arrange to be absent from that," replies the alert principal. Fourth, the administrator can protect the members of the group from a multiplicity of demands for additional time and energy, making it possible for them really to go into action on the enterprise in hand. Of course, the administrator has to *really* believe in the group if he is to do that.

A large portion of the failures to get from planning to action can be traced to a lack of clarity in the action plan itself. Meetings are adjourned without the members understanding specifically what has been agreed upon, and no further clarification is forthcoming; the action is left at a hazy stage of description—"by the next meeting we'll try to approach the mayor on this"; responsibility is not fixed—"everyone try to get some materials which seem suitable for the unit we are preparing." Such faults can be avoided easily. The presiding officer at a group meeting, or one of the other members, can summarize in 1-2-3-4 fashion just what is ahead. Intelligent and foresighted participants can quiz about the detailed steps which must be

contemplated. The proposal can be outlined on the blackboard, or a written statement of the plan can be furnished each member soon after the meeting. These techniques will undoubtedly suggest others to the reader.

Purposely, we have said nothing specifically about the use of outside consultants in getting a group started. Experience has demonstrated rather conclusively that the employment of a consultant who really knows group work is one of the surest means for securing good results, provided the group is ready for a consultant and the consultant is ready for this particular group. Techniques for the proper use of consultants are becoming known and would warrant detailed treatment if space permitted.

These partial answers to one of the five questions commonly raised about techniques of working in groups serve to demonstrate the fact that democratic procedures can be learned; that successful group work demands more than good intentions and effervescent wordiness; that there are methods of realizing in action the objectives depending upon the operation of group intelligence. If the article stimulates further thought and experimentation in the field of techniques, and the reporting of other successful procedures, it will have accomplished one of its major objectives.



WHEN WE TALK OF FREEDOM and opportunity for all nations, the mocking paradoxes in our own society become so clear that they can no longer be ignored. If we want to talk about freedom, we must mean freedom for everyone inside our frontiers as well as outside.—From *One World* by Wendell L. Willkie. (See "Legislation for the 'Democratomic' Age," page 229.)

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