

Where Does Cooperation Start?

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Cooperation within a professional staff is improved most effectively, this article contends, as each member gains better understanding of his feelings about himself and about others, and attains a clearer concept of how a group should operate.

IMPROVING cooperation within the professional staff involves three problems: one's feelings about himself; one's feelings about others; and one's concept of the way a group should operate.

Accepting Self

Let's look first at our feelings about ourselves. What do we want for ourselves from the work situations in which we participate? Do we want deference or special status? Do we want others to always agree with us? Do we want the center of the stage and to eliminate those who threaten us in attaining that position? Do we want to win any dispute or issue that arises? Do we want to get ahead of other people? All of these feelings operate to prevent our cooperating effectively with other people. They increase our own insecurity and prevent our developing empathy for others.

Are we insecure because of lack of ability or training or because we have achieved our present position through political preferment? If so, we are constantly on guard to see that others do not discover our weaknesses. It prevents us from thinking with others, from being in a position in which we may examine our uncertainties with others and obtain help from them.

Are we possessive? Do we insist on receiving credit for any idea that we

have advanced? Do we want to take over plans and programs that have been developed by others? Such possessive feelings prevent us from being accepted by others and decrease our enjoyment of the working situation in which we find ourselves.

If we find any of these feelings in our examination of ourselves, and we all have them in varying degrees, what can we do about them? How can we become more effective workers for better learning situations for children?

We must first of all know what we believe and what we want to become. By study of the research that is rapidly becoming available concerning leadership, human relations and group operation, we can secure more evidence on which to base our beliefs about the kind of person we would like to be.

Secondly, we can engage in a constant process of self evaluation. We can formulate a set of criteria to apply to our own behavior based on the beliefs that we have about the kind of person that we want to become. We can be scrupulously honest with ourselves, recognizing shortcomings as the areas in which we need to work rather

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than as phases of our personality which we ignore. We can begin to try out new procedures and evaluate the results in terms of the reactions of others. In groups studying educational leadership with which I have been working I have seen individuals, who found themselves rejected by the members of groups in which they participated, so change their pattern of behavior in a four month period that they became accepted. While it is true that they may not have made changes in their personality which would carry through to all situations, they did become sufficiently conscious of the results of their behavior to develop a pattern of participation which increased their effectiveness in those groups.

Accepting Others

Let's turn to our feelings about others.

Do we feel that we are better than they; inferior to them; must compete with them; must win in order to get recognition, salary increase and promotion; should try to please them; are fearful of their power; must be on guard against them; have more integrity than they?

To improve our relationships with others it is necessary for us to seek empathy, to recognize that the first task in working with other people is to get to understand them, to know their purposes and to discover the reasons why they act as they do. We accept their purposes as legitimate and desirable for them. We recognize that they too seek better learning situations for boys and girls even though their experiences have led them to other conclusions as to ways this end may

be achieved. We take the time that is necessary to sit with them, to get to know them. We place our emphasis on discovering the purposes and plans that we have in common and seek agreements as to the things that we can do together. We recognize differences as the areas through which both of us may grow through interaction or joint planning and experimentation.

To be secure in our relationships with others we operate on the assumption that we are expendable. We don't attempt to conceal our true feelings or fail to back the proper idea at the proper time. We make clear our beliefs and our uncertainties.

If we pretend that we are something we are not and attempt to operate in terms of someone else's expectation, we place ourselves in jeopardy. We put ourselves in the position of constantly attempting to guess what is the appropriate behavior in the situation, and as a result we develop increasing insecurity, which decreases the contribution that we can make. We run the risk of becoming so devious that we don't know for sure what we are or what we believe.

We are in a position to exert leadership in a situation as we accept ourselves and our own beliefs, work in terms of these, and accept the consequences of our beliefs and actions.

The problem for each of us is to understand and accept the worth of others without feeling it is necessary to compete, crush or copy.

Working in a Group

Finally, let's examine our role in a group.

Each group is different but all have common problems of leadership, coordination, communication and the use of authority.

As we become a part of a group our first job is to discover our role. What do we expect of the group? What do its members expect of us? We know that our role will be constantly changing, that groups are dynamic, that roles and even group structure emerge through the interplay of expectations. But we need a starting point.

Leadership

What does the group believe about leadership? Does it believe that the leader is a superior person? Does it believe that leadership is associated with status position?

Cooperation is promoted, it seems to me, when group members recognize that leadership is any contribution of an individual to the formulation and execution of group purposes. Any individual, status leader or otherwise, may exercise leadership in a group through the contribution of ideas, emotions or skills. We promote cooperation by working for this idea.

Loyalty ceases to be loyalty to persons; it becomes loyalty to ideas. A person is loyal to the best that he knows, and he works with others to promote the fulfilment of the best that he knows. Superintendents, supervisors, teachers and pupils move away from a concept of loyalty in which they expect others to be loyal to them. All want their ideas and recommendations to be subjected to the same scrutiny as that given the ideas of others.

Cooperation ceases to mean cooperation with the ideas of the official leader.

Instead, it means willingness to cooperate in the formation of purposes and the carrying out of agreements.

Coordination

One of the difficulties in living together is lack of clarity concerning the roles that various people will perform.

How is the group coordinated? Does the official leader tell each what his role is and insist that all be responsible to him? Coordination can be achieved this way, but cooperation may not result.

Cooperative coordination is obtained by thinking through implementation at the time policy is formulated.

During decision-making there is also discussion of how the decision will be implemented; the persons who will be responsible for carrying out the decision talk through with all those who participate in making it the role that each will perform. The various roles are described definitely enough so that different individuals in a situation have the same expectations as to roles and responsibilities. Further definition of the role for the individual emerges as additional responsibilities are allocated to him.

Communication

Another problem of group living is that of communication. Each individual, if he is to feel responsible for the work of the group, must have a way for getting his ideas considered. As members of a group striving to promote cooperation, we assume responsibility for helping individuals hear each other. We encourage getting together frequently enough to help individuals in the group know the pur-

poses and feelings of other members of the group.

Authority

Probably the most confusing problem in promoting cooperation is the exercise of authority. Who has authority in the group? How shall authority be used?

As a group is organized, authority for forming and executing policy is placed in the hands of the status leader. If it is an informal group that elects its leader, the person chosen has authority given him by the group until it selects a new official leader or the group dissolves. If a group is a legal institution created by the government, as is the public school, legal authority rests in the hands of the designated administrator. In either case, the official leader may exercise the authority residing in his office in the way that he believes will most effectively release the creative potential of the people working with him.

Authority that is shared is the most effective way of promoting cooperation. Shared authority means that the person who has been granted the official authority, by the group or by some outside agency, shares the decisions that fall within his authority.

Actually, the sharing of authority is the only device that a democratic leader has for control of a group. If he operates in an authoritarian way he can control the group by force or by taking away privileges. If he does not use his authority the group may disintegrate.

Individuals come together because they have common purposes and com-

mon interests. When these no longer exist and individuals begin to see their vested interest will be infringed upon by the decisions of the group, they withdraw and form a new group unless there is the authority to hold the group together. If the group is willing to live by agreements reached, the decision-making process becomes the control and authority is spread throughout the group. All become responsible for the decision and for its enforcement.

But shared authority is contingent on the good faith of the members of the group. Unless individuals are willing to live up to agreement, the official leader has the responsibility to enforce the decisions of the group. He cannot avoid it.

For effective group operation the official leader must take the steps that: make clear his willingness to share authority; keep the lines of communication open so that all who wish may participate in the formulating of policies which he has the authority to make; but he must also assume the responsibility for exercising the authority which forces individual members to live up to group agreements. In any case, he will continue to believe in people and work for shared responsibility.

Other members of the group must constantly evaluate their feelings about themselves and others; be willing to identify problems and seek solutions with others; abide by decisions reached; and encourage the official leader to constantly increase the areas of shared decision.

Cooperation is a two-way street, but it starts at home.

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