

Bringing Perspective to the Change Situation

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CHANGE is one of the major challenges of our time. It has become commonplace in our culture, particularly among educators, to speak of "change." In view of the pressures each of us in education experiences to be aware of new ideas, programs, and practices, it hardly seems necessary to dwell on the relative merits of being for or against change.

Given the nature of our dynamic society, coupled with current social, political, and economic unrest, change becomes an imperative issue as opposed to a debatable one. What appear to be at issue are questions such as:

1. Who decides when change is indicated?
2. What direction should a specific change take?
3. How extensive should the change be? (For example, should elements in the present program be discarded in toto or modified and adapted to the new program?)
4. Will the change bring about better programs than those currently in use?

The reader will note that the questions identified as issues have value and decision-making orientations. Because of the differing values held by individuals and the uniqueness of human perception, we have the ingredients of a potentially turbulent situation when a particular change is contemplated.

An attempt will be made here to focus on some of these change issues. The frame of reference for this discussion is the experi-

ence encountered by the author while working as an outside change agent with local district educators attempting to initiate improvements in their school programs.

Elements of Change

It should be apparent to anyone who has attempted to initiate any educational change that no clear blueprint, strategy, or process exists which can be applied successfully in all situations. There are models and strategies from which a potential change agent can extract ideas that may be appropriate for his particular situation. It is in this spirit that several elements of change have been identified for discussion purposes.

Need for Involvement

The literature strongly supports the principle that those who are to be affected by a change ought to be involved in the decisions concerning the change.^{1, 2} Obviously, there will be limitations to this principle, par-

¹ Robert S. Fox and Ronald Lippitt. "The Innovations of Classroom Mental Health Practice." In: *Innovations in Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1964. p. 41.

² John H. Johansen. "The Relationship Between Teachers' Perceptions of Influence in Local Curriculum Decision-Making and Curriculum Implementation." *Journal of Educational Research* 51 (2): 81-83; October 1967.

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ticularly where large numbers of individuals form the target group. However, when large numbers preclude involving all to be affected by a particular change, then some means of indirect involvement through *peer* representation can be employed. The idea of involvement appears to be a crucial factor with relation to the success or failure of an innovation at the implementation stage. Laboring for two and a half years in the "innovation vineyard" has made us acutely aware of the validity of the involvement principle.

The need to maintain open communication among all parties to be affected by an impending change is extremely important. To be sure, our experience has shown that direct involvement maximizes conditions for exchanging ideas, dissemination, and receiving feedback on suggested proposals or plans. Given a choice, communicating on a person-to-person basis should be utilized by those wishing to influence behavior. Experience has also taught us that communication by telephone with a written follow-up is more effective than either of these techniques used alone.

Climate for Change

Another factor which appears to exert considerable influence on whether or not change occurs is the organizational climate that obtains. Several studies have demonstrated a relationship between organizational climate and innovation in educational settings. An example of this type of study is the work done by Hughes, who states: "Innovative districts did evidence a climate which could be described as more open than did non-innovative districts."³ Since the behavior of leadership personnel is an important factor in the kind of organizational climate which prevails, it would seem reasonable to assume that such behavior can serve to stimulate or stifle change in a given situation. Teachers or others in a subordinate position have to feel that the leader really

wants help and suggestions of an innovative nature. The leader who desires to encourage change must seek ways to reward creative suggestions when they are advanced by his staff.

Need Identification and Assessment

The identification and assessment of needs comprise an important element in the process of change. This step can be used to develop an awareness of the necessity for change in all individuals to be affected by such change. Many techniques can be used in gathering data about needs. A "brainstorming" technique has been used with much success by members of the ASSIST⁴ staff. Briefly, this technique can be described as follows:

1. Individuals are organized in small groups (about 10 to 15 in each group seems to work well).
2. Participants are instructed to share any idea that comes to their mind.
3. No value judgments are permitted pertaining to any suggestion made.
4. The only questions permitted are those seeking clarification of any idea offered.
5. At this stage, the emphasis is on quantity as opposed to quality of ideas.
6. The ideas should be recorded verbatim, if possible, for subsequent analysis.

In this type of free-flowing procedure some of the data on needs that are offered will be of little or marginal value; however, the new insights that may result from an analysis of all of the information provided by group participants usually make the effort expended very worthwhile indeed.

The quality of the output of a procedure such as "brainstorming" is obviously contingent upon the insightfulness of the group participants. Every effort should be made to involve as representative a group as possible

⁴ ASSIST is an acronym for Activities To Stimulate and Support Innovation in Schools Today, a supplementary educational center of the Wayne County Intermediate School District funded under Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

³ Larry W. Hughes. "Organizational Climate—Another Dimension to the Process of Innovation." *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Autumn 1968; p. 21.

so that the benefits of varying points of view can be obtained.

Complementary to the procedure described here is the utilization of outside consultants in the assessment of needs. After proper orientation to the factors involved in a particular situation, outside consultants from universities, state departments of education, intermediate districts, regional laboratories, or supplementary centers can be of assistance in providing some valuable insights which may have eluded local staff. Hopefully, the orientation of outside consultants will include consideration of "hard" data (for example, achievement scores, drop-out rates, and student unrest) which may be available. Failure to consider such data in assessing needs would be folly.

Establishment of Priorities

Most school districts and other institutions are confronted with the reality of limited resources, both human and material. Consequently, it becomes necessary to establish priorities when improvements in programs are contemplated.

The task of establishing priorities of needs is greatly facilitated by the use of several techniques. A representative planning group can be called upon to rank into priority order the needs identified through "brainstorming" or any other appropriate survey technique. This will be done *after* the needs have been categorized or coded, thereby reducing the quantity to a manageable number. By employing a written instrument, many individuals can be involved in this process in large organizations. When this latter course was taken in a regional study of educational needs in Wayne County, a twofold benefit was found to accrue: (a) the expertise and experience of a large number of professionals were brought to bear on a problem; and (b) an awareness of the identified needs was communicated to the participants.

Searching for Solutions

Assuming that the need for change has been determined and, further, that there is

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agreement on the priorities of those needs, then the search for solutions becomes the next logical step. Obviously, there are times, perhaps too often, when the process is reversed, that is, when someone has a "pet" solution (program) and his task seems to be to find or to create a need!

The "brainstorming" process described above works equally well in seeking solutions to needs as it does in identifying needs. Circulating a written list of the priority needs among members of an organization, with the request that they propose solutions, has also proved to be quite effective in generating new approaches. Eliciting suggestions from outside consultants can also be productive at this stage of the process. It is strongly suggested that consultants be presented with problems or needs that are quite specific if they are to make a worthwhile contribution. Obviously, care should be exercised in selecting a consultant whose expertise is closely related to the educational need under consideration.

Another good source of new ideas is to

be found in the vast amount of professional literature published. Unfortunately, local practitioners too often lack time to ferret out information or they may not have access to this valuable resource. One answer to this need for instant information is being provided by some supplementary educational centers funded under Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. As part of its regular services, the ASSIST center maintains a compendium of innovative practices, a list that is available to local educators on a request basis. In addition, on-site visitations are arranged for educators interested in viewing a particular program in action. Digests of educational research, bibliographies, and other professional literature are provided local educators interested in pursuing a specific topic or program idea. An inventory of consultants is also maintained at the center. It is possible, within a matter of minutes, to identify a consultant in a specific program area for an inquiring client. A linking relationship with other information centers and with a major university (Wayne State University) makes possible access to resources previously unavailable to local educators. The accessibility of these resources ensures a large number of choices which may be considered. This enhances the probability that a study committee will select a solution that is appropriate to meet the identified need.

Implementation

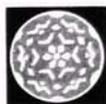
Since no two situations are identical, it would seem reasonable to conduct a small scale tryout of any contemplated change. Prior to the initiation of such a pilot endeavor, the means for evaluating its effectiveness should be developed. Goals and objectives should be established, along with procedures for systematically gathering data

as the pilot program progresses. The results of the evaluation should dictate whether or not a program is worthy of widespread implementation. There is a critical need for the results of the program's success or failure to be disseminated throughout the profession. When we can talk about our failures as well as our successes, we will have matured as a profession.

The educator seriously concerned with facilitating change will find answers to the questions raised at the beginning of this discussion through as much involvement as possible of those to be affected by the change. This involvement includes the processes of identifying and assessing needs, establishing priorities, searching for alternatives, and evaluating proposed solutions. In addition, he should endeavor to establish an organizational climate which is characterized by openness. Finally, educational leaders, wishing to encourage change, must demonstrate to subordinates that innovative behavior is not only acceptable but is highly valued.

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