

THE WHAT, HOW, AND WHEN OF PROFESSIONAL IMPROVEMENT

Supervisors critical of one another can use a systematic process to enhance their working relationship.

"In my job, I associate constantly with uncooperative faculty members and indifferent principals."

Sound familiar? This statement, made by a district science supervisor, represents the frustration of supervisors from every educational level.

Since the roles supervisors and principals play are so critically important, we might expect them to possess a natural allegiance to each other. Unfortunately, in many instances they are adversaries. One principal, commenting on the district reading specialist assigned to his school, said, "I don't know what she really does. When she's in my school, nothing happens."

Regardless of the specific complaints a supervisor and a principal, teacher, or a fellow supervisor may have about each other, the heart of the problem is invariably a breakdown in communication. Each may assume the other is carrying out certain responsibilities and initiating certain actions. When they finally get together, they find their assumptions were quite wrong.

This negative relationship, of course, is not universal or irreversible. When supervisors and professional personnel do make efforts to enhance their relationship, improved instruction usually is the end result.

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For the past three years, we have been involved in developing and using a process that removes much of the guesswork from the supervisor/professional relationship. We call it the Collaborative Instructional Improvement Process. It is a communication-facilitating process that enables the supervisor and a colleague to sit down together, identify problems, delineate action strategies and responsibilities, specify time constraints, and establish an evaluation design.

Five basic steps constitute the process:

1. The supervisor and the other professional should *individually* list behaviors, factors, variables, and so on, that they feel are creating the immediate problem.
2. They should list and compare their individually perceived needs and then *together* identify the major needs they have determined by consensus. This list represents *what* is to be accomplished.
3. When the consensus list is completed, they should then develop an action strategy and list of responsibilities to meet the demands of the problem. These strategies and responsibilities need to be carefully delineated so that each party will know *how* the other will perform the collaboratively established tasks.
4. Next, for each *how* strategy or responsibility listed, the two parties should establish a corresponding timeline. Actual dates should be stated to determine *when* activities will occur or be completed.
5. Finally, they should schedule regular meetings throughout the problem-resolution sequence. Progress should be assessed in terms of the

previously delineated *how* and *when* items, which can be altered as the goal warrants.

Changes in the consensus list (*what*) are not recommended during these progress check sessions. Discerning the consensus needs is critical to the entire sequence; the individuals involved should have taken adequate evaluative measures to affirm the accuracy of the *what* phase of the sequence. If, during the process, both parties agree that the identified consensus needs are in error or need to

be rectified, the original sequence should be discarded and a new one initiated.

An Application

Let's consider an actual application of the process, as used by an assistant superintendent for instruction and a reading supervisor. The general problem area was to determine how the supervisor's time and expertise could be used most effectively in designated schools.

Figure 1. Reading Supervisor's How and When

Strategies and Responsibilities	Timeline
Visit every designated school and discuss role with all teachers.	by October 1st
Visit with the principal of every designated school, outline supervisor's role, and seek support in performing duties.	by September 15th
Publish and distribute a monthly reading idea sheet for personnel in designated buildings.	Ongoing; by last school day of each month
Chair reading committee to encourage inter- and intra-school activities in the designated schools.	Ongoing; monthly
Review status in buildings with principal at least twice per semester.	October, December, February, and April
Work with assistant superintendent for instruction to develop general visitation schedule.	Prior to September 1st

Figure 2. Assistant Superintendent's How and When

Strategies and Responsibilities	Timeline
Meet with principals of designated schools to review job description and role of reading supervisor.	August principals' meeting
Utilize reading supervisor for testing and/or consultation with teachers from designated schools who request or need technical assistance.	Ongoing
Arrange for reading supervisor to have a leadership role in districtwide staff development endeavors.	As per date
Assess the effectiveness with which the time and expertise of reading supervisor is being used by principals and teachers.	November, January, March, and May
Meet with reading supervisor every two weeks.	First and third Thursday of each month

In step one, the assistant superintendent and the supervisor each identified the reasons creating the general problem. The assistant superintendent cited the following: (1) teachers were unsure of the precise nature of the supervisor's role particularly due to district and federal policies about developmental reading and Title I reading; (2) the supervisor needed to use the time better; and (3) most of the principals the supervisor served had limited awareness and knowledge of reading; as a result, some principals didn't know precise services to request of the supervisor. The reading supervisor's perceived problems were: (1) too many buildings located over too large a geographical area, (2) lack of significant referrals from principals, (3) lack of time for follow-up work with teachers, and (4) teachers' reluctance to ask for help.

After the supervisor and the assistant superintendent compared and discussed these factors, they collaboratively agreed on the *what* of the process. The consensus needs they identified were: (1) to increase the visibility of the reading supervisor in the designated schools; (2) to clarify the role of the reading supervisor as it relates to developmental and Title I reading efforts; (3) to establish an effective scheduling sequence for the reading supervisor; and (4) to create a follow-up process to reinforce the efforts of the reading supervisor and facilitate effective feedback.

Figure 1 shows steps three and four, the *how* and *when*, as they relate to the reading supervisor's involvement in the process.

Figure 2 conveys the *how* and *when* of the assistant superintendent in relation to the consensus needs.

The two parties agreed to meet on the first and third Thursday of each month in order to discuss problems and issues pertinent to the reading supervisor's duties. A significant portion of each meeting was to be devoted to the process' final step, the progress check.

Implications

The Collaborative Instructional Improvement Process is effective because it can serve so many crucial purposes. First, it can be the vehicle for meaningful dialogue between two professionals, helping each individual develop a better understanding of the

other's position, educational beliefs, and expectations.

Second, the process is excellent for facilitating initial planning. Using the process, two professionals can lay out a cooperative action plan for a particular problem. This mutual effort will establish what is to be accomplished, the responsibilities of both individuals, and the manner in which they will judge their effectiveness.

Third, as it is implemented, the process can be the focal point of discussions between the two participants. In these meetings, as contrasted with the meaningless exchanges that frequently take place, substantive educational issues are discussed and action strategies identified and agreed upon. Both people know the terms of the process, and their discussions can focus on their progress in implementing it. Past activities are described, future ones are planned, and problems and successes are shared.

Fourth, in these days of accountability, evaluation is always a significant issue. The very nature of the process makes evaluation a relatively simple matter. Both professionals know the priorities, and as the *when* portion is being implemented, they can determine the degree of progress. After this evaluation is completed, the professionals can analyze what has occurred, what "needs" remain, and determine the emphasis of future planning sessions.

Finally, the process can serve as a "documentor" of accomplishments. Using such a written record, the professional can quickly and comprehensively show not only his or her activities but also the positive changes in which he or she has played a part.

Conclusion

The Collaborative Instructional Improvement Process is a practitioner's tool. It has been effectively used in school districts of varying size, affluence, and location by individuals with different levels of educational training and professional experience. Their areas of expertise have spanned the total range of educational disciplines, and their positions of authority and power have represented an equally broad spectrum.

Despite the differences among the users of the process, it has proven successful in virtually every instance. The process will work if two persons strive to make it work. ■

"For teachers (as for any client) to seek or accept help is to admit they have insufficient power to help themselves."

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