

Legitimizing the Hidden Agenda

Transactional evaluation is a valuable communication tool for drawing out and resolving beneath-the-surface elements that hinder educational goals.



Hidden feelings and attitudes cause problems for schools. When student or staff behavior is inconsistent with school goals, it's time to identify these off-the-record feelings and work toward reducing conflict.

A useful approach devised by Rippey (1975) is Transactional Evaluation (TE). An instrument similar to the familiar Likert scale is used, but in this case items come from students and staff members themselves. Briefly stated, the procedure is:

1. Each person submits anonymous statements of concern, need, interest, criticism, praise, and so on, relating to issues that are or could become sources of conflict.
2. The statements are collected, categorized, and placed on an instrument in which responses are limited

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to "strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree" (Figure 1).

3. The questionnaire is administered to all members of the group.
4. The results are tabulated and distributed to the group for their discussion and consideration. Areas of agreement and conflict are identified. Members of both sides of a polarized issue are given a voice in developing and recommending a plan of action.
5. The revised program is put into use and monitored periodically by both supporters and doubters to determine if it is functioning as intended.
6. The process is repeated when the need arises.

Transactional evaluation can be used with students, staff, parents, and others as part of a process or formative evaluation plan. Rippey's (1973) work contains many accounts of its successful use in a variety of settings.

My experience with TE began in 1975. As a new graduate assistant/doctoral student, I quickly became aware of some problems in my department's graduate assistantship program. At the same time, I happened

to stumble on transactional evaluation in one of my course readings. With the advice and consent of the department head, I involved my fellow graduate assistants in a TE study. It yielded a substantial hidden agenda. Follow-up meetings between department administrators, faculty, and graduate assistants resulted in many program improvements, including clarification of graduate assistant duties and roles. The following year I used the technique to improve the curriculum on an undergraduate class I helped teach.

Part of my doctoral research (1978) involved the use of transactional evaluation by high school student teachers. Data were available on 847 high school students enrolled in the classes of 15 student teachers. Eight student teachers used TE, and seven served as the control group. Those who used TE methods were rated by their students as being less critical, impersonal, and restrictive.

My most recent and challenging use of TE was with a magnet high school staff in Dallas in 1980. Less than two weeks remained in what had been a busy and sometimes stressful school year. The principal was new to the school. Enrollment for the next year was uncertain. Curriculum development was behind schedule. And the community was getting impatient as test scores dropped and school taxes increased.

The feeling of closure one normally senses in a school in mid-May was definitely missing, so we decided to use TE. Statements were submitted, and the questionnaire was put together and administered. We reserved the last staff development day for the big discussion.

Because of this school's humanistic philosophy and curriculum, its staff is unusually keen on individual and group communication skills. The sensitive nature of many of the items indicated that if not handled carefully, the presentation and discussion of the results could get touchy. Luckily, two outside educators trained in psychology and experienced in group processes agreed to facilitate the meeting.

Although there were some tense moments, the evaluation was very successful. The goals of the school were clarified and conflict was reduced by bringing administrator and staff perceptions of policies, proced-

Figure 1. Example of a Transactional Evaluation Instrument (Condensed).

Please read the statements, and on a separate answer sheet, respond by circling the letter that best represents the extent of your agreement or disagreement.

- a = strongly agree
- b = agree
- c = disagree
- d = strongly disagree

I. General Attitudes and Morale

1. There has been an improvement in staff unity in the last few months.

II. Procedures, Policies, and Rules

- A. General
 24. We have become too rule and regulation oriented.
- B. Decision-Making Processes
 33. Although shared decision making is time consuming, the results are worth the effort.
- C. Staff Meetings
 39. Weekly staff meetings are unnecessary.
- D. Staff Development
 46. We should have a staff retreat once a year.
- E. Use of Time: Structured and Unstructured
 55. If a person is unexpectedly needed to fill in for someone else, everyone should have to take his/her fair turn.

III. Curriculum and Instruction

66. In order for the curriculum to "work," teachers must supplement it with some kind of daily or weekly lesson plan.
72. We have so many "extra" activities that we lose emphasis on our real purpose—education in the subject areas.

IV. Discipline and Student Services

75. We all need to be clear on how our discipline system is supposed to work.
83. We need to bring parents into the solving of student discipline problems much earlier than we generally do.
89. Privileges and opportunities should be provided equally to all students in the school.



ures, and roles in closer harmony. The school year closed on an optimistic note.

Caveats

Based on my experience with transactional evaluation, I suggest certain cautions before, during, and after the TE process:

- Do not force it on a group. Explain the goals and procedures beforehand, and include only those who want to participate and are interested in improving, not sabotaging, a program. TE will work only with those who value group decision-making processes and nonauthoritarian leadership styles. It will not work with autocratic leaders or with students and staff conditioned to follow orders.
- Editing of TE statements should be kept to a minimum. However, statements that contain multiple opinions or address more than one issue should be divided. Do not repeat statements expressing the same basic thought; use the most articulate one.
- To sustain interest and increase chances of success, complete the process quickly. The first four steps should be done within a week.
- Once the TE process is in motion, all phases and steps should be carried out. Commitments to an agreed-on plan of action should be honored. If anyone (especially a person in authority) is perceived as having reneged on his or her part of a plan, the process is likely to backfire, producing feelings of resentment, distrust, and disillusionment.
- The evaluation should be coordinated by a neutral party. Besides possessing basic research and evaluation skills, the evaluator should have experience in facilitating group processes. ■

References

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