I'd Like To But I Don't Think I Can

The nominal group process can improve staff development by bringing into the open factors inhibiting change.

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Staff development is most effective at the level of the single school and the individual classroom (Goodlad, 1979; Corrigan and Howey, 1980). However, two decades of experience as teacher, principal, supervisor, and professor have convinced me that before we can take advantage of the school and classroom setting, we must learn to deal with the unique blend of policies, role expectations, staff relationships, and other work conditions that impede adoption of new techniques.

Even when schools identify worthwhile topics, set attainable goals, select the best activities, and follow up and evaluate results, there is no guarantee that staff development activities will improve instruction in classrooms. The problem seems to be that important personal and organizational factors remain hidden and unresolved. Staff members are reluctant to initiate changes when they believe their lack of knowledge, time, material, and parent or administrative support dims the prospect of success. Moreover, they naturally resist if they expect a change to bring them into conflict with their co-workers, students' parents, or supervisors.

A Solution

There are ways to reduce the degree of perceived impotence associated with these restraints. When I lead staff development activities at the local school level, I expand the needs assessment to include a nominal group process (Delbecq and Van de Ven, 1971).

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Preplanning

Prior to the needs assessment session, arrange tables in a room so that six to ten participants can work together comfortably with some degree of privacy. Writing materials needed at each table are a flip chart, different colored felt-tip pens, plenty of 3″ by 5″ cards, masking tape, and pencils. Two leaders are needed when the number of participants is more than 30.

Before the meeting prepare an appropriate stimulus question to which the participants will respond in writing. For example, if the school staff has selected the topic of improving the teaching of spelling, the stimulus question might be "What personal and organizational constraints may prevent you from improving the teaching of spelling in your school?" If no topic has been identified, a broader question could be "What areas of instruction do you want to improve in this school and what personal and organizational constraints might prevent you from making those improvements?" In either case the stimulus question is placed at the top of a response sheet, which is given to each person.

Getting Started

After the participants are seated at the tables in heterogeneous groups, explain the purpose of the session, seek their commitment and cooperation, and emphasize that they are meeting to identify concerns rather than solve them. Also explain that conversation unrelated to identifying and prioritizing concerns is undesirable and will impede progress. Distribute the stimulus question, read it aloud, and have the participants list their responses on the papers with a few words. Providing sample responses is helpful. For instance, a personal constraint may be "lack of knowledge to teach spelling skills," while an organizational constraint may be "lack of administrative support" or "lack of materials." The rule at this point is that everyone is to respond to the question in writing while silence is maintained for 15 to 20 minutes. Tell those who finish early to reflect more deeply so that a quiet atmosphere will ensure full involvement with the task. Also, individual writing of responses avoids distractions and premature evaluation of responses.

Step Two

For the remainder of the activities, the person acting as recorder at each table asks each participant in turn to read one item from his/her list until all items have been read aloud. The recorder writes every statement on the flip chart as either a topic or a constraint without attempting to redefine, categorize, or clarify. The recorder must prohibit discussion of any of the items during this step. As the flip chart fills with statements, pages are removed and displayed for the participants to see. The purpose of this "round robin" procedure is to share risky problem dimensions with other faculty members and prohibit informal leaders, highly verbal individuals, and status position holders from dominating this portion of the session. Having each individual offer a single idea allows secure individuals who are greater risk-takers to engage in self-disclosure. This makes it eas-

ier for less secure individuals to take their turn and suggest risky problem dimensions that would usually remain hidden in an open discussion.

After all ideas are listed on the wall charts, the recorder should take about 15 minutes to make sure the meaning of each statement is understood by the participants at the table. During this activity the recorders are to resist attempts to combine statements.

Step Three

A voting procedure is useful to assess the group priority rating of the topics and constraints listed on the charts. For example, participants may write on cards the numbers of the five items they believe to be of greatest priority. Collect cards and tally on the flip charts the total number of votes for each item.

At this time it is a good idea to give the participants a chance to explain why they consider some items important and others unimportant. Similar items may be combined; however, try to make sure that consensus to combine is reached quickly. A show of hands is a good way to quickly settle this concern. It is better to have similar items than to debate whether or not items are similar or dissimilar. If necessary, additional items may be added to the priority list. This part of the activity can be completed in less than 30 minutes with some careful monitoring by the leader.

In small schools with fewer than ten faculty members, the needs assessment may be complete at this time and the participants can see their final rankings. Following a break, or at another session, the staff should be ready to begin selecting goals, setting specific objectives, and planning staff development activities that fit the unique work conditions at their school.

In large schools another step is usually necessary, because more groups working at different tables usually generate more items.

Step Four

When this final voting procedure is necessary, the participants use the list from step three to identify the five or more priority topics and constraints by writing the numbers of these items on separate 3″ x 5″ cards. In addition, they are to order the problems from the most important to the least important. For example, if statement number two is their highest priority they could write 5 next to it and if number four is their lowest priority they could rank it 1. Collect the cards. The items with the highest totals are the high priority staff development concerns. The needs assessment data are now complete and the staff members who participated can see their final rankings and begin to set goals, objectives, and plan activities that fit their unique needs.

The entire process can be done in one or two sessions. Because teachers, specialists, administrators, and parents need to participate with equal status, the leader for the session must preserve a collegial arrangement and squelch attempts by more aggressive or higher ranking participants to monopolize the session. For this task, the leader must be able to use group process skills and program planning techniques.

Common Constraints

I Don't Know How. A constraint often revealed by the nominal group process is "I lack the specific knowledge about how and when to. . . ." To overcome this, staff development activities can include observation of demonstration teaching, role playing, micro-teaching, guided practice, or a buddy system in which two or three agree to help each other.

Only with plenty of support and immediate feedback from knowledgeable colleagues do participants help each other over the I-don't-know-how barrier. Related to this is the tendency to stop using a new technique because first attempts feel awkward and appear unsuccessful. One way to prolong the tryout period is to have the participants agree in writing to try an idea at least so many times—perhaps 20 or more. During the initial tryout it helps to have many opportunities to ask questions, share positive and negative experiences, and get immediate help and specific feedback from colleagues, consultants, and administrators.

They Won't Let Me. Very often parents or other staff members are perceived as constraints. One way to deal with this concern is to have teachers, principals, and parents confront each other to determine how valid the claims are. The opportunity to discuss this openly may reveal the allegations are more imagined than real. On the other hand, frank discussions often show the need for specific policies and attitudes. In any case, the tendency to think of others as barriers to change is a common phenomenon that is best handled through candid discussion. Revealing these concerns early in the staff development process may minimize conflict and free participants to pursue new techniques by diminishing fear of future reprisals.

No Time, No Money. Organizational constraints often revealed by the nominal group process are lack of time, materials, funds, or administrative support. Writing an instructional improvement contract may solve this problem. To develop a contract, teachers, principals, appropriate central office specialists, and the principals' superiors jointly construct time lines, budgets, and work assignments. The contract describes goals, criteria, contingencies, constraints, and responsibilities. The contract is always renegotiable and helps each person predict what support to expect in the future.

Change is Difficult. The goal of any staff development needs assessment is to identify the significant concerns of the staff. The nominal group process can help.

Of course, there is no guarantee that problems will automatically be identified and resolved by this process. Nevertheless I have found that disclosing and prioritizing significant topics and constraints in the early stages of staff development often reveal the unique personal and organizational features of the local culture that must be seriously considered if we expect the people who work in that culture to change their behavior. ■

References

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