

Developing Principals' Problem-Solving Capacities

A pilot group of principals in Pasco County, Florida—who first were thoroughly trained themselves—are now beginning to train others in a research-based approach.

These days educators seem to agree on three points: (1) student achievement patterns can and must be improved; (2) the local school, under the brilliant leadership of the principal, is where necessary changes must be made; and (3) principals need a lot of help and support in order to pull it off. There may be less agreement about what help principals should get. Here we report a success story based on one view of the skills principals need and how they can be acquired.

The Pasco County School District, in Land O' Lakes, Florida, has designed a comprehensive Human Resources Management Development system to develop the capacity of current and future principals to influence how schools address and solve their learning challenges. The system includes provisions for selection, certification, development, and appraisal of principals.

In planning the certification and development dimensions, Pasco County selected the Managing Productive Schools (MPS) Training Program (Snyder in press) as its core two-year program, with others to be added as needed. The district selected 12 principals K-12 to participate in a pilot

program. At the end of the first school year (1985-86), the participants recommended that the district make the program available to all current and future principals.

The 12 principals have since completed training in the ten management competencies. In April 1987, they began preparation as trainers, an effort that will enable Pasco County to build its own capacity for management development from within.

Here we wish to share how the training program made use of current research on management, instruction, and adult learning. What we have learned may be helpful to others who are designing leadership development programs.

The Management Training Program

The MPS Training Program, which consists of 30 days of training over two years, is based on three premises: (1) there is a knowledge base, admittedly imperfect and incomplete, to undergird improvement efforts; (2) the essential message for principals from that knowledge base is that effective leaders in all kinds of organizations facilitate *collaborative* efforts; and (3) developing "stretch" goals through

collaborative efforts is fundamental to all developmental and assessment activities that follow.

The MPS Training Program is based on a four-cluster Management Model (Snyder and Anderson 1986)—organizational planning, staff development, program development, and school assessment—encompassing ten management competencies (see fig. 1). Here is a brief summary of the major research findings within each cluster and the training activities in which Pasco County principals engaged.

1. Organizational Planning Cluster

• *Research themes.* Productive organizations are driven by a few stretch goals identified through shared decision making. Goals are then subdivided into tasks and assigned to both permanent and temporary work groups and teams. The groups cooperatively develop action plans to accomplish their tasks. Within a group context, individuals establish performance goals that specify their intended contributions to the school's success. The resulting organizational plan becomes the focus for work, development, and assessment.

• *Training activities.* During the planning workshops, principals had two objectives: (1) to develop process

skills for leading collaborative decision making about school development goals, and (2) to design an organizational structure to accomplish the many tasks necessary to achieve the goals. A major outcome of the workshops was that principals learned that managing a productive school means organizing and developing groups of teachers (both teams and departments, as well as ad hoc task forces) that focus on school priorities in their work. Most principals were surprised to discover that having both permanent and temporary groups can invigorate their schools and increase the flow of ideas and information.

2. Staff Development Cluster

● *Research themes.* In productive organizations plans are made for knowledge and skill acquisition important for achieving goals. Staff members make workshop plans as they anticipate their collective needs and seek the best available resources. An important finding is that teachers' development processes are creatively stimulated when some form of coaching follows a workshop. Further, when work groups—the building blocks of successful organizations—are provided with skill-building opportunities, the capacity for shared inquiry and problem solving is enhanced. Collaborative forms of quality control are viewed as developmental and provide adjustment opportunities for the organization.

● *Training activities.* Using their cooperatively developed school improvement goals as a guide, the principals designed staff development systems (inservice, coaching, production, and organization) to facilitate the adult learning process. They learned the skills necessary to instruct their teaching teams and departments in peer coaching, action planning, communications skill building, conducting effective meetings, and group problem solving. They also designed a quality control system to provide staff opportunities for the periodic adjustment of plans and activities in accomplishing goals.

3. Program Development Cluster

● *Research themes.* When educators examine the student learning chal-

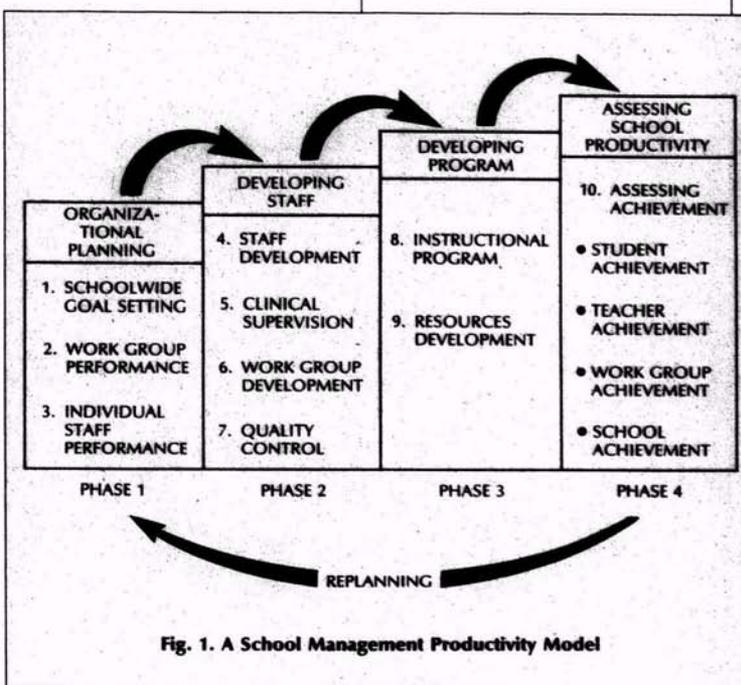


Fig. 1. A School Management Productivity Model

lenges they face, better solutions evolve from making use of the knowledge base. From the work of Bloom (1976) and others, we know that students master knowledge and skills to the extent that the following conditions exist: (1) instruction is matched with readiness levels, (2) instruction is guided by clear expectations and procedures, (3) active and interactive task engagement is managed, and (4) positive reinforcement and correctives are provided to ensure certain levels of mastery. Solutions to learning problems occur when leaders facilitate problem-solving and development activity and generate the necessary resources.

● *Training activities.* A continued focus of the workshops was on recognizing and correcting teaching problems and on managing instructional improvement efforts by teams and departments. The knowledge base on program planning, diagnosing readiness and style, classroom manage-

ment, and teaching and learning patterns guided training sessions. The intent was to enhance each principal's ability to stimulate professional inquiry about learning and instruction among teams and departments.

4. Organizational Assessment Cluster

● *Research themes.* Productive organizations have complex assessment systems that measure the success of goals. Work groups assess the results of their work; individual staff members are assessed for their contributions to expected organizational outcomes; and student assessment data serve as a feedback measure for improving the instructional program. Assessment data in productive organizations provide a feedback loop for short-range planning and long-range growth targets.

● *Training activities.* Already knowledgeable about school evaluation, principals in the pilot group were guided in designing a comprehensive

“... having both permanent and temporary groups can invigorate ... schools and increase the flow of ideas and information.”

assessment system that reflected various influences upon the attainment of school goals. Dimensions of school evaluation included measures of work

group productivity, the results of individual teacher contributions, evaluation of leadership assistance, and measures of student achievement.

Table 1
The Competency Development Model:
A Workshop Series on “Developing Work Group Skills”

GUIDING CONCEPTS	APPLICATION IN THE WORKSHOP
READINESS STAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rationale for developing skills to work in groups ● Management competency: to teach group leaders skills in action planning, communications, and problem-solving techniques
CONCEPTS STAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Research patterns on the characteristics of productive work groups ● Concepts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stages of group development Group action planning Communications skills Problem-solving techniques: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Force Field Analysis The Basics Creative Problem Solving
DEMONSTRATION STAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Printed sample of a work group's action plan and its key components ● Live demonstration of four communications skills ● Videotape demonstration of “The Basics, Force Field Analysis, and Creative Problem Solving”
PRACTICE STAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teams of principals select one of the group skills demonstrated and prepare to teach those same skills to a simulated school group. ● Each set of group skills demonstrated is taught by a team of principals in the workshop, using key concepts and techniques demonstrated.
REINFORCEMENT AND FEEDBACK STAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Each team teaches one of the group skills to the others in training, while another team provides feedback, using the key concepts and techniques demonstrated. This stage reinforces for all participants the rationale for key concepts and techniques.
TRANSFER STAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Principals develop two kinds of plans: (1) short-range practice of skills taught in the workshop, and (2) long-range efforts to develop the capacity of work groups and leaders. Follow-up coaching plans are also made for sharing and problem solving the practice experience and for sharing next step plans.

The Competency Development Process

As we planned the pilot program, we sought a workshop design that would stimulate the adult learning process.

There are two prevalent views of adult learning, and the results they produce are strikingly different. The *pedagogical* approach assumes that a body of external knowledge exists to be learned and practiced and that the learner remains dependent on that external source for validation. A more powerful view of adult learning, however, is the *andragogical* approach (Knowles 1980), which views external knowledge and instructors as resources to the learner in problem-solving activities that lead eventually to self-directed learning. Building on the andragogical model, Brookfield (1986) reports that adults learn to problem solve best when they are working on real problems in a group context.

Each workshop in the MPS Training Program is designed to support the concepts of self-directed learning and group problem solving about school challenges. The knowledge base for each of the ten training programs guides task activity during the workshop.

Our competency development model demonstrates the relationship between organizational expectations, workshop events, and on-the-job coaching. The literature emphasizes the importance of high organizational expectations to productivity (Drucker 1982, Peters and Waterman 1982) and of workshops that facilitate development followed by on-the-job coaching (Joyce and Showers 1982). If any one of the three dimensions—expectations, development opportunities, or coaching—is missing, competency development has less chance of occurring. When used as the basis for planning, these three interdependent variables provide both the context and the direction for professional growth within school organizations.

Six core dimensions (influenced by the work of Joyce and Showers 1982) drive the development model, each playing a vital role in management growth. The design is based on the

assumption that learning results from a desire to resolve dilemmas or problems. The *readiness* stage of a workshop provides a rationale for the events to follow. In the *concepts* stage, principals are introduced to research patterns and other scholarly theories that hold promise for resolving specific problems. A conceptual base equips leaders with ways of thinking about issues and challenges, which subsequently replace how-to-do-it bags of tricks as problem-solving tools.

In the *demonstration* stage, principals view a portrayal of the concepts being used successfully to solve specific problems. This vicarious learning enables participants to rethink old patterns and "try on" new approaches. The *practice* stage of a workshop gives them an opportunity to try the new concepts under ideal conditions. Practice during the beginning stages of skill development increases the probability that the new concepts will find their way into the workplace.

Reinforcement and feedback are essential to skill development. Providing adults with feedback on their first practice increases the likelihood that successful on-the-job practice will occur. And, if adult learners both practice and give observation feedback, the concepts are then reinforced during the workshop at least three times.

The *transfer* stage encourages practice with follow-up coaching and assistance. Organizational support in this stage is essential for the actual application of knowledge and skills to problem solving on the job. Table 1 illustrates the workshop organization, focusing on "developing work group skills" (competency #6 within the staff development cluster) using the competency development model.

Results: Improved Ability to Solve Problems

We have made two major observations of the principals in our validation group. First, the concepts and skills helped each principal focus more clearly on the nature of management tasks for developing a productive school. These new and finely tuned skills have enabled them to stimulate more goal-focused collaborative activi-

ty. Principals are making fewer decisions by themselves as they develop in groups and leaders the capacity to share responsibility for school efforts and their results.

Second, the competency development model has supported the learning process and the interaction of all concepts and skills for the ten management competencies. The coaching sessions between workshops enabled principals to share the challenges they face. Networking has resulted from the selection of principals across K-12 levels.

After two years of training and of practice, the principals report that their teachers are more involved in decision making, that dissension is waning, and that their staffs are expanding their capacities for confronting challenges. □

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