

## The Principal

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### Confessions of a Workshop Presenter

Like many minor celebrities on the education scene, I am sometimes invited to give workshops for other schools or districts. Too flattered to refuse, I go when I can, but always feel uneasy about taking people's money for a product I'm not sure is worth much.

In my opinion, all workshops are about two-fifths show. You've got to grab an audience and hold them, and you can't do that with information alone. So you try to dazzle them with your cleverness and charm. Then you give a few extroverts in the crowd a chance to perform so they can feel clever and charming, too. You also try to provide audience participation activities in order to forestall boredom.

Another two-fifths of a workshop is "snake oil," that is, selling something you know isn't going to work when the buyer gets it home. Not that presenters offer a dishonest product, it's just that they must translate their ideas and experiences into models, examples, guidelines, and simulations that are too abstract and fragmentary for beginners to convert into practice.

The final fifth is—I hope—usable information, but if my experience as a workshop participant is valid, that too proves ephemeral, slipping from memory long before one has the chance to use it.

With the need for staff inservice training so widely felt and the cost of workshops so high, schools ought to be able to make better use of them. I think they can. The fault, "dear Brutus," is not in the workshops, "but in ourselves" as principals and district administrators. If we were to start with a design for an inservice program that

includes, but does not rely solely on, workshops, we might get better results at a cheaper price.

The first essential in an inservice program is focus. In the course of a busy school year a group of principals or teachers can probably do only one new thing. Forcing them to attempt more will ensure that nothing receives their full, honest attention. No matter how many pressing issues are facing our schools in a year, we should choose only one, then put all our efforts into making changes in that area.

Second, we must provide a warm nest for the new "chick" to hatch. Although the composition of a "nest" will vary, it always involves enough time, money, and materials to help people get things moving. It also involves deemphasizing, combining, or even removing some other parts of the school program to make room for the desired innovation, and eliminating any potential conflicts between the new and the old. If, for example, you are going to institute a process writing program, you'd better get rid of the language workbooks.

Third, we must create a structure to support the change. Before attending a workshop, participants need to hear an overview of the rationale behind the total inservice program. Along with the workshop they need to do some reading, and afterward they need to visit schools where the innovation is working. During the implementation stage, work groups should be organized and given time during the school day to meet. Mechanisms for people to assess their own and each other's progress have to be put in place along with some fair rules of the game. For instance, teachers should

not be evaluated on an innovation until they declare themselves ready. At the same time, the administrators in charge need systems to gather information and make in-course corrections so that they don't have to stand by hoping for the best while the innovation assumes a life of its own.

Finally, I am convinced that to be successful a plan for change must have flexibility so that leaders and participants can make it their own. Where "top-down" change works, it is because space for personal adaptation has been built in.

As for the workshop presenters, they should also be a part of the overall inservice plan. When a district gives up the idea of three or four different workshops a year in favor of a concerted effort toward one kind of change, the saved funds can be spent to bring a presenter back to help with planning, monitoring, and evaluation. As members of the leadership group, presenters offer not only their greater knowledge of how the innovation should work but also their outsider's viewpoint. As a workshop presenter, I would feel more comfortable with this arrangement than the "hit and run" deals I am now a party to. Knowing that I had a serious and continuing relationship with one group of people would help me to improve my workshops by offering less showmanship and more substance, a more well-rounded treatment of the innovation, and techniques to help the participants remember and use the information I give. □

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