Chapter 14
Leadership Skills in Complex Collegial Adult Groups

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ABSTRACT

Collegial groups of professional people have been shown to produce high adult achievement and performance and therefore learning the skills of working with groups to solve instructional problems is a critical task of supervision. This paper covers knowledge, skills, and procedures for developing productive instructional improvement groups in the complex school environment characterized by turbulence and chaos emanating from dysfunctional group members. Throughout this paper, the importance of these methods in developing group leadership skills has been explained: using group observations, changing group leadership styles, dealing with dysfunctional members, and preparing for meetings. The paper also demonstrates how development supervision can be applied to professional groups by showing how a developmental supervisor matches the supervisory approaches to the group's characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

Learning the skill of working with groups to solve instructional problems is a critical task of supervision. Collegial adult groups have been shown to produce higher adult achievement and performance than individualistic or competitive learning

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(Yorks & Kasl, 2002). Professional people who are brought together to deal with pressing mutual problems have a right to expect results. Lengthy meetings break the morale of group members. They might become reluctant a pathetic, and sometimes hostile towards future meetings. They might even suspect that the group leader is deliberately leading them a stray so that the groups' inability to decide can be used as an excuse for the leader to do whatever he or she wishes. Regardless of whether the leader is actually trying to create confusion or truly desires a group decision, the lack of clear results erodes unity and common purpose. Groups that work productively, efficiently, and harmoniously generally have a skillful leader. Unfortunately, since being part of a group is such an everyday occurrence in professional life, we seldom stop to think about what makes some groups to proceed naturally in a professional manner. A leader needs to be conscious of the elements of a successful group, select clear procedures for group decision making, be able to deal with dysfunctional behavior, use conflict to generate helpful information, and determine appropriate leadership style.

Dimensions of an Effective Group

There are two dimensions of an effective professional (Cooper, 2002). The *task* dimension and the *person* dimension. The *task* dimension represents the content and purpose of the group meeting. The task is what is to be accomplished by the end of the meetings. Typical tasks of professional groups might be deciding on a new policy, writing a new instructional schedule, coordinating a particular curriculum, or preparing a professional development plan. An effective group, obviously, accomplishes what it sets out to do. Specific task behaviors are clarifying the group's purpose, keeping discussions focused, setting time limits, and appraising group progress toward the goal. A leader who says, "We're getting off the track; let's get back to discussing real issues," is exhibiting a task behavior. Imagine a group that exhibits only task behaviors. The meeting would be formal, cold, and tense. People would not receive feedback, would not be encouraged, and probably would swallow hard before addressing the unsmiling, staring faces. Such a group would accomplish its task quickly, with little mutual support. The decision would be quick because participants would wish to remove themselves from the tense environment as soon as possible. The formality of the sessions would prevent in-depth discussions of feelings, attitudes, and differences of opinion. Decisions would be made on the basis of incomplete information and commitment from group members. The implementation of the decision would be problematic at best.

The *person* dimension of an effective group comprises the interpersonal process and the satisfaction participants derive from working with each other. Concern and sensitivity to participants' feelings create a climate of yearning to meet with each