

THE "ROTATING FISHBOWL"

*an effective technique
for solving
interdepartmental problems*

When four managers get together, recognize interdepartmental problems that inhibit maximum productivity and openly express a willingness to seek a solution, the only thing that remains is selecting the right method of strategy.

Such was the case recently at a medium size manufacturing plant. It illustrates the value of openness, mutual trust and authenticity. And equally as important, it points up the rotating fishbowl as an effective technique for solving problems. This is the first time, to the authors' knowledge, that the rotating fishbowl has been used to solve interdepartmental problems.

Recognition that interdepartmental problems existed and were in need of solution spawned with four managers who had just completed a Manager Development Training Program. They absorbed the main emphasis of the program — that for problems to be solved effectively, there is a need for a climate of concern, trust, openness and authenticity. Together they decided to seek professional problem solving help from the company's Organization Improvement Section. An applied behavioral scientist met with the managers and, with their collaborative effort, designed an activity that effectively exposed the issues inhibiting production.

Various models for problem solving were discussed with the managers. The individuals felt the groups involved should assume the responsibility to work the data. Based on the nature of the problems and the working climate within the organization, the design had to be a fast-moving, comprehensive technique to expose the pressing problems quickly. A "rotating fishbowl" strategy was discussed as the most appropriate vehicle for problem identification and solution because it would provide exposure to several different interdepartmental issues, provide maximum understanding of the others' function and role, and work most effectively toward building more of a total climate of trust and openness.

PREWORK IMPORTANT

After deciding to use the fishbowl technique, the group determined the specific prework that would be necessary. Together they structured the format. Five departments were involved in this effort: Industrial Engineering, Manufacturing, Production Engineering, Quality Control and Production Control. Three of these departmental managers were involved in spearheading the effort. They contacted the other two managers for their participation and suggestions for design of the session and topics to be covered.

In turn, each of the five managers then selected four to six of their key personnel to participate. They explained the purpose for the encounter and why the fishbowl technique would best meet their needs. They also decided which departments had the most urgent, workable problems to be solved. Following these preliminary meetings, the managers held a critique for feedback. Their objective: to digest what they learned from the meetings and to make a final decision as to which departments should work together on urgent issues.

This prework became an important factor in the success of the design, for each manager volunteered suggestions and made tangible contributions toward structuring the program. They also decided on the critical interfaces. Thus, without this type of commitment to develop a trust-oriented atmosphere and abide by the ground rules, the design would have been neither operative nor effective. In a real sense, then, the managers became change agents.

HOW THE FISHBOWL WORKED

Following the general inputs on theory and purpose of the meeting, representatives from the five departments involved moved to assigned rooms; two departments to a room. The fifth department worked alone on intradepartmental problems. The other four departments formed a circle, one enclosing the other to form a fishbowl. The inner circle

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then generated interface departmental problems for 15 minutes while the outer circle observed and listened. The outer circle with the help of a trainer-observer commented on how the inner circle discussed their problems. They centered attention on how open and readily the inner circle brought up problems and noted the group climate.

After this process critique, the departments switched roles; the outer circle became the inner sphere for observation, followed by the critique. Then both groups formed one working segment. Together they decided on priority problems from the data generated as well as a course of action to solve them. This action planning was very specific in terms of names, dates and tentative strategies. Some of the problems, for example, pointed out the need for more technical quality assistance on a particular shift; the need for improved attitudes and relationships between the Quality and Manufacturing departments; and the need for various other functions to become involved earlier on cost estimates.

The fifth department, concentrated on improving its own operations or team building. They discussed the need for more effective performance appraisals; the need for group interaction and for subordinates to take the initiative to "test the system," and the need to establish periodic planning sessions.

In mid-afternoon, the departments switched their pairings and again followed established format. The progress made in the afternoon was summarized in the evening. Then, the entire group made recommendations as to how the results could be effectively communicated to others.

RESULTS MEASURABLE

The immediate reaction from all five department managers was highly favorable. Problems were surfaced and identified; some were resolved and others tagged with commitments from the individuals involved to solve them. Most of the action plans had deadlines with spe-

cific individuals committed to their implementation. Moreover, the departmental managers made commitments to continue the informal follow-up sessions among themselves; to review the continuing progress and to make reports to the entire group.

Two days after the afternoon-evening session, the department managers zeroed in on the time frame to which the commitments were geared. To make things happen, they adjusted the dates which they felt could not be met.

Two weeks after the session, a follow-up check revealed all items committed for action were executed by all departments save one. Emergency conditions in the plant justified the date slippage on the commitment. More follow-up action

continued after this interim period to determine when, where, and how to follow-up with participants and to discuss ways to deal with a new problem between other departments.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Since the rotating fishbowl was used primarily to work interface problems, it appears there could be greater advantage having a sixth department. A third fishbowl should have been formed with another department providing it had interface with at least two of the other five departments. The managers concerned should determine the significance of the interfaces. Should the original five departmental managers decide that the sixth department doesn't have

APPENDIX

OUTLINE OF THE "FISHBOWL" DESIGN

Afternoon

11:30-12:30 Lunch: Trainers, Department Heads and departmental participants.

12:30- 1:00 All meet in conference room

1. Introductions
2. Theory, purpose, goals
3. Content and process — description
4. Administrative details

1:00- 1:05 Departments report to respective locations. There are three meetings going on at the same time. Each of two meetings contains two departments. The third group is made up of one department.

Interdepartmental Meetings

1:05- 1:15 Trainer-observer: Briefly review purpose, groundrules, and responsibilities. Each department forms a circle with one circle being inside the other. (Fishbowl)

1:15- 1:30 Department in the inner circle brainstorms on the question: "What is it that the other department does or doesn't do which prevents getting our job done more effectively?" This session is intended merely to generate not to discuss problems. The department head, as a change manager, writes the problems on a flip chart which is located outside the inner circle. The outer circle is not allowed to comment during this session.

1:30- 1:35 The department head briefly summarized the problem areas and gets agreement on urgent, workable problems.

1:35- 1:40 The department in the outer circle gives a process critique on the inner circle.

1:40- 2:05 The two departments now change circles and run through the same format.

2:05- 3:05 The two departments join together in one large circle. The department heads review the problem areas and get agreement on two urgent, workable problems. The entire group defines the problem and establishes action plans in the form of goals, targets, and dates. In addition, the group decides when and where the problems not treated in this meeting will be worked.

Intradepartmental Meeting

1:00- 3:05 One department works with this question: "What can we do within our own department to improve departmental performance?" Once problems are established, the group works on the development of action plans to meet the problems. Ideas for departmental improvement are thoroughly discussed and decisions made. Anything can be challenged and worked, including existing policies, procedures, styles, climate, etc.

All Departments

3:05- 3:20 Coffee Break in central conference room.

After the coffee break, the departments switch interfaces. For example, if departments one and two were initially in one meeting and departments three and four in another, they would switch so that department one might meet with department three and department two might meet with department four.

3:20- 3:25 Departments report to new locations.

Interdepartmental Meetings

3:25- 5:20 These meetings take on the same format as the previous two department meetings.

Intradepartmental Meeting

3:25- 5:20 This department deals with internal problems along the same format as the previous single department meeting.

All Departments

5:20- 6:15 Refreshments in the central conference room.

6:15- 7:30 Dinner

7:30- 9:00 General Meeting

1. Review action plans — department heads.
2. Make recommendations for communication to others.
3. Input from boss — although not at the actual work session, he is committed to the process and provides the group with his feelings and thoughts on what happened and where he sees the kind of problem confrontation in the overall climate he would like to see established.
4. General critique and next steps.
5. Adjournment.

mitted for discussion, according to the ground rules. This restriction is difficult to maintain in its purest sense because many issues are likely to be wider in scope.

DEPARTMENT MANAGERS - A KEY

The key people that can make the rotating fishbowl work successfully are the department managers. Their function is to lead the meetings, clarify cloudy issues and serve as recorders. The rationale for this approach is to deal with the power situation as it really is with one modification: the boss functions as a change manager rather than as the traditional boss. His position and role are key factors for success because he writes down all of the problems and has, therefore, the opportunity to play the clarifying role. He is not, however, the focus of the meeting.

His emphasis during the meeting is on changing the ways his group copes with problems. He has the opportunity to make inputs, the same as any member of the inner circle, but he must not censor topics of discussion. His behavior and his degree of commitment to these ground rules can spell success or failure. Likewise, his commitment to problem solving and the ground rules in intradepartmental meetings is equally important. The departmental objective is to improve its own performance. This means that it is not "legitimate" during the session for the group to discuss interface problems with other departments. Excuses or rationalizations such as — "...but we're a service department," are not acceptable. The department must concentrate on its own problems and operate within a trust-oriented atmosphere to do this.

THE TRAINER-OBSERVER ROLE

The function of the trainer-observer is very different from the role of the department manager. He has no leadership responsibilities. The trainer-observer is strictly a resource whose main functions are to help the group stay within the ground rules and to help with the process critique.

significant interface problems, the potential input of the sixth department would be denied and pertinent problems overlooked.

It is also felt that the interdepartmental meetings could use an extended process critique during the hour-long session devoted to joint problem solving. There is nothing in the current design that says process critiques cannot be introduced at any time. But, to do so in this situation would mean compressing an already crowded hour.

GROUND RULES AND ROLES

To effectively resolve or solve problems, there is a need for an open and free

climate. Fear of criticism or censure in any form, either during the meeting or back at the plant can inhibit productive discussion and generation of ideas. Thus, a permissive atmosphere is needed. The outer circle should refrain from comments during the 15-minute session that the inner circle is generating workable problem situations.

At the same time, the inner circle must avoid censure or discussion. They can, however, raise problems or clarify issues for easier recording, but they must restrict themselves to interface problems with the department in the outer circle. Intradepartmental problems and problems within departments, not represented within the group, are not per-