A Practical Guide to Program Planning

By Peter J. Murk and John H. Wells

As adult training and continuing education programs become more popular, their bottom-line success in the future may not depend on their content alone but on how well-designed and well-planned they are. Whether it is a retraining workshop or a professional conference, a training program for adult learners and professionals must be meaningful for diverse individuals and have the flexibility to accommodate changing conditions and needs. As a program planner or training coordinator, you must have a clear, systematic planning model to develop and conduct programs that result in real participation and measurable learning.

Most traditional program-planning models for continuing professional training are linear in design. An extensive review of the literature reveals that most contain these seven sequential steps:
- assessing needs;
- establishing program priorities and responsibilities;
- selecting program goals and objectives to address suitable themes;
- allocating available resources;
- selecting appropriate teaching and learning techniques;
- evaluating the results or outcomes;
- determining the program's effectiveness.

Sork and Buskey's evaluation of the program planning literature from 1950 to 1983 (in the 1986 *Adult Education Quarterly*) includes a generic planning model synthesized from their research. After studying more than 50 training or program planning models, the authors judged that the above steps used in the various models were similar to those in

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the linear model. Their generic model, however, comprises eight specific steps and may be used to gauge the extent to which other models share general program planning tasks. The generic model includes the following steps:
- analyzing the planning context and client system served;
- assessing the client system's needs;
- developing objectives;
- selecting and ordering content;
- selecting instructional resources;
- formulating budgets and administrative plans;
- designing a plan for assuring participation;
- designing a plan for evaluating the program.

In Boone's 1985 book, *Developing Programs in Adult Education*, he compares and evaluates nine program planning models and classifies them according to context, scope, philosophy, perspective, applicability, and primary themes. The most basic similarity in the models he studied is that all included these basic programming processes:
- defining problem or need;
- setting objectives, goals, and means;
- conducting formal and informal learning activities;
- explicitly or implicitly evaluating the process.

According to Boone, each of the nine models is adaptable to most adult education and training contexts. All of the programming processes are based on explicit or implicit educational and social philosophies, and all of the authors cited express the need to address the needs and interest of the learners.

All of the models we have reviewed and analyzed to date seem to follow the linear, sequential process of program planning and development. Some models emphasize involvement on the part of the planner at the initial

stages; others call for comprehensive involvement throughout the event or program. Nearly all of the models include an instructional design process. Yet, because of the sequential nature of linear program models, omitting any step in the critical planning process, or altering the order of the steps, may cause the entire program to fail; linear planning models do not provide easy ways for returning to or skipping over particular stages of the process. Thus they limit the trainer's or planner's ability to design and plan an adult learning program that is truly meaningful and flexible.

We have developed an alternative to the traditional linear process called the systems approach model—or more fondly, SAM. SAM consists of interdependent yet interchangeable program components whose order and use can be adapted to suit the nonstatic conditions and needs of most learning programs.
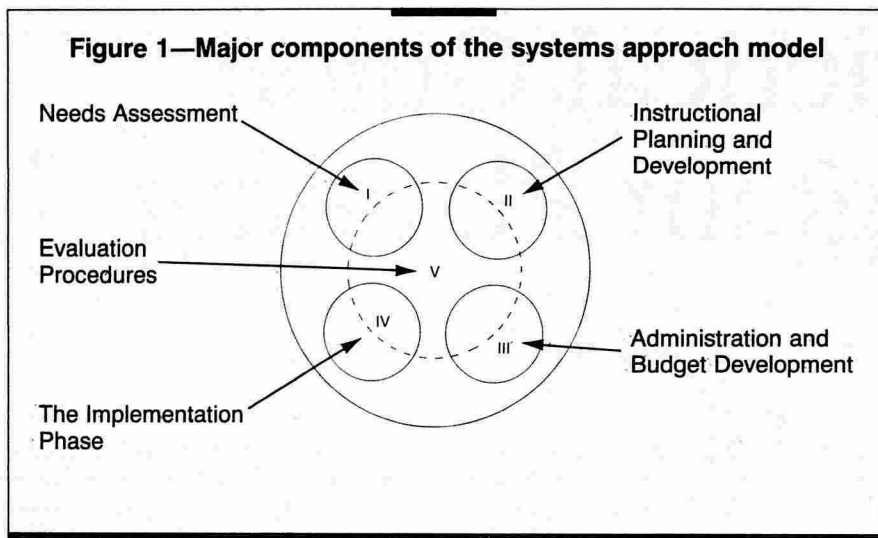
The systems approach model

SAM began as an evolutionary adaptation of the early training models developed first by McKinley and Smith —working in tandem—in 1965, and later updated by McKinley in 1980 and by Smith in 1982. It has been tested and proven effective in many program planning experiences and has received positive evaluations concerning its ability to achieve the desired outcomes of adult and continuing education training programs.

SAM consists of five components that are dynamically interrelated yet independent (see Figure 1). For SAM to be successful, all five components must be used, although not necessarily in the linear fashion of the traditional models. It is unique in that it allows program planners to work on two or three components simultaneously, giving them leeway with such factors as

Figure 1—Major components of the systems approach model

Needs Assessment

Instructional Planning and Development

Evaluation Procedures

Administration and Budget Development

The Implementation Phase

time constraints, limited finances, or lengthy committee assignments. SAM allows planners to deal with their situation as it is, rather than as it might be.

In this article, we discuss each component of the model separately, and then demonstrate interrelation and interdependency.

Needs assessment. As the training coordinator or program planner, you should know the major purpose(s) or rationale behind the development of your program. Once you know the purpose, ask yourself who should attend the program. What is the target population? You can determine the target population and pinpoint its needs and interests using formal needs assessments techniques (such as questionnaires, survey samplings, or telephone marketing surveys), as well as other informal methods (such as personal conversations, networking support systems, or client- and community-involvement strategies). Use the assessment tools systematically to make sure you have an adequate basis for your planning decisions.

All planners involved should understand the needs, aspirations, and educational and financial limitations of the adult participants. In addition, needs assessment includes categorizing and evaluating any existing training programs, and taking an inventory of resources. A final important step is to establish your priorities—what's going to happen and when, and how will it come about.

Instructional planning and development. Once you've identified the purpose or rationale of the program, the program participants, and their needs, you're ready to plan and start developing the instructional process.

This process includes the following steps:

■ defining the theme of the event or program;
■ identifying meaningful goals, objectives, and outcomes of the program;
■ selecting appropriate activities and packaging them in an attractive format;
■ choosing effective instructors or resource people with appropriate qualifications and credentials;
■ coordinating program logistics, such as events, people, sites, times, and audio-visuals or other learning aids;
■ developing and administering formative evaluation procedures, which build on the program's goals to ensure success and meaningful instruction and learning.

Administration and budget development. Planning the administration and budget is a component of SAM that should not be overlooked. The administration and budget development process includes the following:

■ formulating a cost effective budget, based on direct and indirect costs and charges and realistic fee structures;
■ securing a funding source through grants or endorsements from associations or co-sponsorships, if funds are not readily available;
■ establishing adequate, reliable administrative personnel to handle such functions as enrollment, registration, refunds, and bookkeeping;
■ developing competency in advanced publicity, marketing, and public relations procedures;
■ coordinating the necessary "creature comforts" of a successful program, such as proper heating, lighting, ventilation, room arrangements, refreshment breaks, meals, and so forth.

Program implementation. The

equation for a successful adult or continuing education program includes continual coordinating and monitoring during the program implementation. Actually reaching the goals and objectives of a program may hinge on your ability to provide the necessary instructional materials, equipment, and supplies, plus your ability to organize an efficient support staff. Implementation also involves accommodating the special needs of program participants and granting them appropriate credit and recognition at the end of the program.

Regardless of the care and attention given in the early planning stages, any well-planned program will have an occasional unexpected crisis. You frequently should monitor the facilities, the instructional content, and the pace. Make any necessary program or schedule adjustments to ensure satisfaction and optimum learning among participants. A working knowledge of audio-visual techniques, planning procedures, and coordinating skills will help ward off last-minute fiascoes. Over-planning a program is often better insurance for success than under-planning.

Evaluation procedures. Other key components of the planning program are formative and summative evaluation procedures. Formative evaluations measure the program's effectiveness at each phase of the planning process, relative to the overall goals and objectives of the program (see Figure 1). For instance, evaluation instruments built into the needs assessment component may help you determine whether your program will address participant's needs and interests. At the instructional planning and development component, a suitable learning evaluation strategy will help you formulate meaningful goals and objectives and identify the appropriate resources and instructors. Perhaps the evaluation will prompt you to revise the program format or objectives to suit future programs or to address specific problem areas. In Component III, formative evaluation procedures might be used to answer such questions as "Have all the factors to be considered in setting the budget been identified?" or "Have competent clerical personnel been hired?" or "Is this the most efficient bookkeeping method for this company?" Finally, formative evaluation procedures are vital in monitoring the overall process or identifying potential

changes that may occur during implementation, the next component. This type of evaluation often generates constructive criticism that is both necessary and useful to the planners and to the success of the program.

To determine whether the program was effective and whether the participants achieved their desired learning outcomes, a summative evaluation is conducted near the end of the program activities, to sum up what went well and what didn't. You may be able to draw "summative" conclusions based on data and information gathered during the formative evaluations. This includes any comments and criticism you may have heard concerning the level of teaching or learning satisfaction by participants, staff, and other trainers or planners. The results of the summative evaluation can be used to plan future programs.

Applications of SAM

As mentioned earlier, SAM's strength is that it allows greater flexibility, practicality, and creativity than linear models. Figure 2 illustrates just how flexible the system approach model can be—you can begin the process at any phase.

For example, consider a case in which a training coordinator seeks and receives a substantial grant to plan an adult continuing education program. His logical starting point is with the administrative and budget component. Using the systems approach, he will conduct a thorough needs assessment, design instructional plans, implement the program itself, and evaluate the various procedures. SAM is readily adaptable to his specific situation.

In another hypothetical example, a respected consultant agrees to be part of a training program for professionals. Because the organization will develop the program around her availability and ability to participate, the best place to start the process is with the instructional planning component.

Here's a final illustration of how SAM can work for trainers. What if last year's adult education program failed miserably? In an effort to determine why the program did not succeed, the sequence naturally would begin with the evaluation component. A program planner could begin the evaluation process first by looking at Component IV—program implementation—and asking, "Was the program monitored carefully and adequately?" and "Was

Figure 2—Various uses of the systems approach model
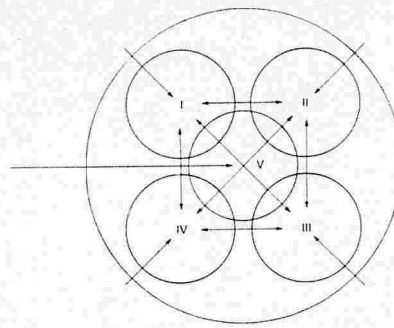
I. Needs Assessment

II. Instructional Planning

III. Administration and Budget

IV. Implementation

V. Evaluation

The model allows entry at any phase. Also note that evaluation occurs throughout the planning process.

the program meaningful to the participants?" In this case, the planner must perform a thorough needs assessment, develop a budget, and analyze the learning objectives to ensure a successful planning program. SAM lets these things happen in the order that makes the most sense.

Again, for all examples, each of the

The systems approach model allows greater flexibility, practicality, and creativity than linear models

other four components of SAM must be addressed to ensure overall program success.

Implications for the trainer

SAM is a viable and flexible alternative to traditional, linear program planning models because it allows you, the training program planner, to take a systematic approach in planning and designing effective programs, according to the conditions or the most pressing need or urgency. SAM takes into consideration any pre-planning steps or "givens" that may have been accomplished previously—for instance, the identification of the target population in the needs assessment component. In contrast to linear models, SAM allows you to draw upon what you already know and move ahead to the next steps, without going back over other steps.

This model is understood readily, is easy to follow, and can be adapted by

various training groups. Most administrators want programs that are going to be productive and profitable, yet cost- and time-effective. Instructors and trainers want the ability to measure learning outcomes, such as behavioral change, job skill development, or attitude adjustment. Program planners want activities to flow in a well-ordered, logical manner. Most important, the program participants want to achieve their desired outcomes and get their time's and money's worth. If followed carefully, SAM can meet these expectations.

SAM is a holistic approach to the overall program planning, teaching, and learning process. As a planner, you can also use the model components as diagnostic instruments to assess learners' needs, to establish meaningful instructional objectives, to set up and properly administer a realistic budget, to ensure a logical agenda of activities, and to evaluate procedures appropriately.

Finally, SAM can be adapted to a variety of settings and utilized by different program planning groups. SAM would be appropriate in an industrial or corporate business environment, where specific skills or intensive training and development procedures are the goals of the program planning process or training seminar. It can be used in planning continuing education experiences for professional groups, such as accountants, attorneys, or corporate administrators. It can also be used to plan corporate conferences for trainers and consultants at the local, state, regional, and national levels.

Whatever the need, SAM can work for trainers too!