

# A COMMUNICATION WORKSHOP: AN OD INTERVENTION

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The time-honored question that often plagues OD practitioners is "What kind of intervention is required to facilitate the process of change?". The answer needs to take into consideration a number of factors and forces within an organization. Here is a case example of what was done in a relatively large Canadian-Federal Department employing some 8,000 people throughout six regions. These regions are geographically located from coast to coast.

Some of the major forces taken into account in this intervention in this government department were as follows:

1. Concern about poor communications became a frequent agenda item at operational meetings and conferences. For example, one full day was spent in discussion of communication at a two-day national meeting involving some 70 regional and headquarters' managers.

2. The organization was experiencing the highest number of union management grievances being for-

warded to the headquarters' level for solution. Analysis of these grievances indicated that the lower levels were not being listened to nor being supported for their decision on these grievances.

3. Feedback from other training programs indicated a breakdown in communications between levels. A representative comment was "My major problem is that I have a boss who never listens."

4. The chief executive officer was aware he was receiving partial or distorted communication.

5. There were many stereotypes existing between groups within the department and between the department and the public.

6. Information derived from performance-appraisal forms and subsequent interviews indicated a need for human relations/communication training.

7. A small group of managers within one of the regions was so concerned about the situation to commit their time and resources to improve communication within their work group and region.

In light of all these factors, it seemed that a communication

workshop for this particular region would be an appropriate intervention.

Not just a workshop! But a workshop incorporating a number of OD design considerations. These considerations included:

1. What kind of people mix would be best?
2. Should participants come in a work team or alone?
3. Where would it be best to hold the workshop — in town or out?
4. How to gather data from participants that would be really meaningful for designing these workshops?
5. What kind of follow-up should be built into the workshop?
6. Should participants' attendance be on a voluntary basis or on an assigned basis?

## Participant Mix

To date, there have been eight one-week workshops involving on a voluntary basis some 140 managers, supervisors and specialists. In light of the forces previously identified, each of these workshops included representation from:

- the major work groups or divisions within the region
- the various hierarchical levels
- external agencies including private enterprise, provincial government and community volunteer organizations.

It was important for each workshop to have different age groups, participants with divergent backgrounds and experiences and a balance of male and female participants. Some of these workshops have had boss and subordinate attending, as well as management and union representatives. A mix of this nature provides a blending of human resources that facilitates participants consulting with each other as well as with the trainers.

Each of the eight workshops incorporated the following design parameters and rationale:

1. Primarily people learn through participation rather than lectures and information giving sessions.

2. The content of the five-day workshop was determined by par-

ticipants attending through a pre-workshop questionnaire, an expectation activity conducted at the beginning of the workshop, in addition to what the instructors thought was needed.

3. There was no one best answer and that the focus throughout the week was to search and develop a range of different alternatives.

4. A climate of trust, acceptance, support and a willingness to risk without fear of and criticism was encouraged in order for participants to experiment and search for these alternatives.

5. Resources for learning were available in participants, trainers and appropriate materials.

6. Training was conducted away from the office where learning could take place in a relaxed atmosphere rather than the pressures of the work environment.

#### Design Ingredients

A number of methods were incorporated into the design of these workshops:

The "image of potentiality" technique was used to assist participants to set work-related communication goals they wished to achieve.<sup>1</sup> Kurt Lewin's force-field analysis assisted participants in bringing their communication work goals to fulfillment.<sup>2</sup>

To assist participants in identifying their values and value conflicts, the Gestalt technique of "carrying out a conversation with oneself" was utilized. In addition, participants were involved in an activity called *value dialogue*, which focused upon influencing one another when different values were involved and to look at what happens to the communication process when such situations arise.

To increase participants' repertoire of alternatives, brainstorming and problem-solving techniques were utilized.

To help the group realize the wealth of knowledge and experience within the group a resource directory of their talents and skills was developed. In this technique participants in pairs interviewed one another to develop a resume around such questions as:

(a) What skills/resources do you have that may be helpful during the workshop?

(b) What types of people do you work with from which others could learn?

A number of nonverbal activities were designed to assist participants in becoming more aware of the nonverbal cues related to leading, following, determining one's space requirements, sending and receiving messages, and congruence between what is being said verbally and nonverbally.

A number of role-play situations were developed to assist participants to develop the appropriate communication skills. The situations were directly related to the participants' communication problems.

Stop sessions were held periodically to determine "how things were going and what changes were required."

#### Important Blend of Resourcing

Utilizing female and male trainers, being internal and external to the organization created an important blend of resourcing having the following dimensions:

1. They had different perceptions of what are the emerging needs and issues within the group and what activities would be relevant regarding these needs and issues.

2. Depending upon the content or issue under discussion different trainer resources were appropriate.

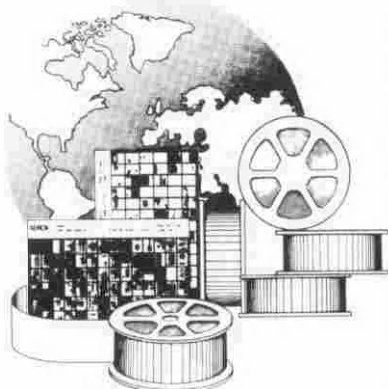
3. A male-female trainer team provided participants with options and resources when they wished to discuss personal matters with a trainer.

4. Again, depending upon the issue, the trainer external to the organization could raise sensitive and "political" issues that would be, for the internal trainer, too risky.

The internal trainer became a continuing support after the training events were completed.

Follow-up letters, evaluation questionnaires and interviews were utilized to follow up and evaluate these workshops. There was a

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significant improvement of communication. There were additional outcomes that could be directly attributable to these workshops. One was the increased number of managers doing what they believed they needed to do and less concerned of what others thought they should do.

Also, there was the establishing of a participative management board, on a pilot basis, within the region to discuss and recommend

operational changes, training programs and priorities.

There were more collaboratively planned union and management meetings. Previously, the time and agenda items for these meetings were determined by management. A number of methods utilized in these workshops such as force-field analysis, brainstorming and goal-planning have been incorporated into their operational meetings.

On a regular basis, first-line managers from the various sections got together to discuss managerial problems and possible solutions. In the past such joint meetings were not seen to be practical or relevant. As a result of these workshops administrative trainees within the region were less concerned about the "trainee" connotation of their apprenticeship and more accepting of the "internship" aspect of their assignment.

The experience and evaluation feedback provided a number of significant learnings. Foremost, an OD intervention does not have to start at the "top echelon" of the organization but can start with members at any level provided they were not satisfied with the situation and wanted to do things differently.

A heterogenous group, in terms of both participants and trainers, provided the blend of experience and resources necessary to identify the changes required and the necessary resources to implement the change.

Developing a climate of trust and acceptance provided the essential support for participants to risk doing things differently within the workshop and their organization.

#### REFERENCES

1. Fox, Robert S., Ronald Lippitt, Eva Schindler-Rainman, *Towards A Human Society - Images of Potentiality*, N.T.L. Learning Resources Corporation, 1973.
2. Lewin, Kurt, *Resolving Social Conflicts*, Harper & Brothers, 1948.

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