



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Longevity and Organizational Climate

Since many of our community colleges are completing 20 or more years of service, it is important to remember how longevity can have an impact on the effectiveness and general well-being of our human and institutional systems. Dallas County Community College District is responding to this issue by providing a team of "in-house" Process Consultants who assist work groups with renewal, rediscovery, and other situations resulting from people working together in the same location for many years.

The basic approach of the Process Consultants is derived from the following set of ideas and principles that are shared with each work group:

1. The older we get and the longer we work here, the more we begin to "value" maturity and the wisdom of experience as measures of worth to our organization. As long as we value these appropriately, but not inordinately, we will continue to move toward optimum effectiveness. One side effect of longevity that deserves attention is the impact it has on work-group dynamics.
2. The advantage of work-group members being together for years is that we really know each other well, there are few secrets, we tend to be more accepting of each other's frailties, and we have learned from and adapted to our respective strengths and weaknesses. We can also develop a cohesiveness based on mutual support, predictability, and shared responsibility. Sometimes, if we are all functioning effectively as human beings, have good will and good intentions, and have better than average communication skills, this scenario will evolve almost without effort.

This is the same process that occurs in the evolution of a healthy family system. Even the "unwritten" family rules of a healthy system seem to benefit the members. The work group members in a healthy system also seem to benefit from the group's "unwritten rules." While every organization has some work groups that fit this description, unfortunately this is probably the exception and not the rule.

3. A more likely scenario of work group evolution is one that is characterized by the exaggeration, integra-

tion, and perpetuation of resentments, unresolved conflicts, lack of clarity, stereotyping, and scapegoating. The sad thing is that this version can develop *even though most of the members have good intentions*. We often hear outsiders describe this kind of work group as "wonderful individuals, but awful when they are working on something as a group." The "unwritten rules" or covert norms of this group are obviously detrimental to growth and development and, in fact, can be destructive.

Depending on the work group's degree of college-wide involvement, the total organization may suffer only minor irritation, or in the extreme case become mired in a completely negative climate that is beyond any reasonable attempt to salvage it. Every organization also has its share of these groups.

4. The good news is that a work group's evolution is certainly not pre-ordained and not even serendipitous (unless we *decide* to leave it to chance). We have a great deal of control over what we become, and when and if we might want to change. The safeguard against a work group's random evolution is for that group to make an early commitment to consciously choosing norms and operating assumptions. If this early choice was not made, but the group members still have fairly good relationships, these norms can be chosen now and a rebuilding process can begin.

Constructive group norms are positive behaviors that are collectively accepted and embraced by group members. They must be articulated clearly and used as guidelines for the group to monitor its integrity. Some examples of norms chosen by a work group are:

We will share tasks willingly, do whatever needs to be done without concern about job descriptions or roles.

We will have regular staff meetings attended by all and will attempt to make them enjoyable.

In all of our interactions with each other, we will demonstrate respect and caring.

We will never criticize each other to external persons or groups.



We will make decisions based on what is best for students with parallel attention to our well-being.

Operating assumptions must also be overt and clearly stated. They relate to attitudes toward and beliefs in certain principles of human behavior. If all work group members are fully aware and accepting of these tenets, a common frame of reference will exist for decision making and conflict resolution. Some examples of operating assumptions are:

The only behavior I can control is my own. There are many right ways to do most things.

My operating style and pace may not be the best for someone else.

The only way I can lose my personal power is by giving it away to someone or something.

I can only help a student, or anyone else, if I am functioning (in terms of interpersonal skills) at a level at least slightly higher than his/her level.

As part of a "human system" or work group, I am constantly aware that every-

thing I do will have an impact on that system.

If work group members consciously choose their norms and assumptions, commitments will be made; furthermore, all members will expect to be reminded of these commitments by others. The group must also make a decision to conduct periodic checks on how well they are doing with their commitments. This attention to process must be an intentional decision. Moreover, it should be part of any work group's planned activities.

Fortunately, in the DCCCD we have access to Process Consultants who can help us choose norms and identify assumptions. Nearly every college has counselors or organizational behavioral specialists who could serve in similar roles. *The crucial reminder for all groups is that the longer you wait, the harder it becomes to make these new choices.*

Bettie Tully, Counselor, Ombudsman, and DCCCD Process Consultant

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Celebrate with us!

The 1991 International Conference on Teaching Excellence and Conference of Administrators is scheduled for May 19-22 in Austin, Texas.

Speakers will include Manuel J. Justiz, The University of Texas at Austin; Tessa Martínez Tagle, Miami-Dade Community College; and William Moore, Ohio State University. Pre-conference presentations will feature John E. Roueche, Claire Weinstein, and Rosemary Gillett-Karam, all from The University of Texas at Austin, plus special sessions by Wally Cox, College of the Canyons, who will provide instruction in country-and-western dancing. The Conference of Administrators; 1991 NISOD Excellence Awards presentation; Monday-evening Mexican buffet and dance; and tours of Austin, Texas Hill Country, and San Antonio round out the schedule.

For more information, contact Suanne Roueche, Director, NISOD, The University of Texas at Austin, EDB 348, Austin, TX 78712, 512/471-7545.

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

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