

A Two-Pronged Attempt at Change

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Can two urgently-needed prongs of development—staff training and community leader training—be successfully handled together? These authors say yes. They discuss one application of this dual training: a workshop on community problems (communication between classes, decision making, etc.) held in an Appalachian county. They believe staff and community-leader reactions from this one workshop may indicate that this training method can be effective in aiding disadvantaged communities. This method includes: (1) isolating the workshop site from the community, (2) having a representative socioeconomic mix of participants, (3) providing for unstructured discussions, and (4) presenting structured situations for analysis.

HELPING LEADERS learn improved means of resolving the issues facing their community is no simple matter. It's particularly difficult when the professional staff available to help these community leaders needs more knowledge, experience, and self-confidence to become engaged in a learning venture with citizens.

This education-action dilemma appears often. It is fairly typical of diversified programs which work against neighborhood or community-wide poverty. A few citizens within the "problem environment" have the desire to cause change—if they knew how or where to start. And paid poverty workers could help the change process if they had the educative skills and insights. They all may try, but anxiety rises as efforts fail. Many become alienated and turn away in despair.

Such is the scene often encountered in adult education, community development, and Extension work—where the professional enters "as on a darkling plain swept with confused alarms of struggle

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and flight." Thus, the dilemma of how to acquire professional competence to help community leaders cries for resolution. What follows is a case in point, involving the Extension staff of a state university and a bundle of abrasive problems in one county. It reports an attempt to deal with both prongs of this dilemma at the same time.

No one needs to be reminded that West Virginia is a state where prosperity is spotty. Contemporary knowledge related to upgrading social, economic, and political institutions has cut uneven inroads. What may be less well known is that a few years ago West Virginia University Extension reorganized and created new outreach programs in a full-throttled effort to strengthen the use of University resources for meaningful impact on cultural change. Through this newly created Appalachian Center, programs began to veer away from education solely for individuals, to also include education for more enlightened group-community decision making.

The field and resident faculty of the Center—primarily the Cooperative Extension Service—had experience and training for individualized teaching among rural clients. To help broaden this background, the Center initiated a special staff development program. Besides traditional educative methods, newer technologies were introduced—such as those associated with the laboratory method of learning. This method emphasizes learning by personally participating plus studying social behavior at the abstract level.

While the staff training program was in no way complete in producing new insights, attitudes, and skills, it did stimulate a fresh outlook for many of the professional staff. On their return home, some began to seek new client groups with which to interact, or to try new ways with groups already in their "portfolio."

SETTING FOR THE CASE STUDY

From several examples, let us select Craggs County (a fictitious name) as the case in point. Creased from boundary to boundary by mountains, Craggs displays some of the finest scenery in the Eastern U.S. Yet land that produces undulating "scenery" does not usually support a strong or variegated community base. For nearly a decade, leaders in Craggs had met through their coordinating county development council to release frustrations, pinpoint problems, and seek solutions. When the federal war-on-poverty program began, the council took initiative and became the official "enemy headquarters" against deprivation in the county.

The anti-poverty program, however, could not be labeled an in-

stant success. As representatives of the "poor" joined the council, a number of middle-class leaders dropped out. It became clear to the council that this pattern was symptomatic of larger problems: The "distance" between socioeconomic levels, between organizations, and between isolated communities in the county had reduced communication to a deafening silence; among groups, suspicions lowered trust nearly to zero. Thus, the skill, the drive to work together at common tasks were hard to measure despite efforts of a committed few. Here was the first prong of the dilemma.

It was evident to the University Extension agents that such matters were not confined to one county. The Appalachian Center staff faced comparable problems throughout the state. Yet during their own staff training program they had taken only a short jump toward the confidence and competence needed to deal with these kinds of social problems. Here was the other prong of the dilemma.

The succeeding account delineates the process used to chip away at the two prongs simultaneously—*train staff to train community leaders, by actually doing just that.*

A WORKSHOP IS CONCEIVED

During a day-long discussion a Craggs Extension educator, a council leader, and the Appalachian Center staff from the campus reviewed the situation. A plan of action emerged, as "reality" competed with "aspiration:"

Aspiration—To assemble in a secluded spot a complete cross-section of the county population—people from all callings, economic strata, geographic parts; there to create a climate conducive to genuine communication, understanding, sharing, and sense of community.

Reality—The most feasible location in terms of available time and money was a camp operated by the County Extension Service. The camp could house and feed the participants and, though near their homes, could provide a psychological distance. Two weekends were chosen. Each phase of the residential program would begin Friday evening with dinner, end Saturday night.

A series of telephone calls around the state alerted eight Appalachian Center professionals who, along with the two local Extension agents, were to staff the workshop. An adult educator, grounded in community and group development, agreed to serve as training consultant.

Meanwhile, 14 persons from the scattered elements of Craggs soci-

ety met in the Extension office to formulate a procedure for recruiting participants. In the words of the county agent, "all persons present approved of this endeavor and pledged their support. Each one made a list of persons whom he thought should be invited. . . . Each selected a list of those he would personally contact. Fifty-two promised to attend." Here was the nucleus for the first prong of the project—training community leaders.

SOME STICKY PROFESSIONAL WICKETS

Difficult questions plagued the second prong of the project—strengthening staff resources. How does an Extension agent—who sees himself as an agriculturist, who feels others associate him only with farmers—begin to change his image and role? Equally important is the issue for the home economist or the 4-H agent whose past years have been spent mostly with farm women and rural youth.

Of course the questions here are oversimplified. But to hold to this vein: If a continuum were drawn with an Extension agent as "agricultural specialist" at one terminal, and university "community educator" specializing in community development at the other, the agent typically finds himself somewhere along this line. The distance from the traditional rural-oriented role depends on a number of environmental and personality factors. Overlying these factors is the Appalachian Center thrust toward broader perspectives, and the professional's sense of urgency to learn new approaches, to see himself differently, to be seen differently.

Putting the issue another way, many Extension agents find themselves like a man trying to move from one canoe to another in mid-stream. He knows the boat from which he is moving is unsound, but he finds himself caught with one foot in each canoe. Poised thus, he tries to summon the balance and self-assurance needed to move to the new boat, without sinking both. The Craggs project suggests one way to cushion the shock of making this transition. Planning and sharing responsibility for executing the design of the workshop afforded a bridge to new self-confidence for the ten who became involved.

Certain characteristics of the staff at Craggs also bolstered the staff-development prong of the effort. Not all members came with the conventional rural orientation. In addition to agriculture and home economics, the academic fields of community development, extension education, sociology, and education were represented. Along with these disciplinary differences, the staff had a broad range of professional experience: two members had some skill in

small group methods. Crag's agents' confidence that their Center colleagues could do the job also strengthened the training team.

Building interdependence among staff was another goal, and an ingredient in the process of staff development. The training consultant was to be on the scene for the first weekend only; the staff would be on its own the second weekend. His presence added a sense of security in the initial stages. However, congruent with his role, he moved toward the periphery as the staff specifically worked toward developing competence and independence.

DESIGNING THE WORKSHOP

If a staff is going to work toward independence from the consultant and interdependence among themselves, it follows that a design created by the whole staff is the beginning of the process. Thus, the staff development prong of the project began two days before the opening workshop session. Eleven people converged on the camp to engage in the dual task of designing a program they could carry through and of becoming a cohesive group capable of interdependent teamwork.

Some of the staff members met each other for the first time here. Others in a real sense were experiencing their first encounter-in-depth. Old stereotypes and impressions began to crumble as colleagues shared their feelings, hopes, and anxieties. As initial fright subsided, the group articulated a dual set of learning targets: *For participants*—how to (1) deal with conflict between organizations and people, (2) increase participation in the community, (3) strengthen and utilize all available resources, (4) develop more open communication, (5) create a climate conducive to experimentation and diversity of opinion and action. *For staff*—how to (1) involve people in programs, (2) apply skills to community development, (3) gain self-confidence, (4) develop new skills in identifying and solving problems, (5) improve interpersonal communication, (6) help people move from paternalistic to independent/interdependent roles.

By the end of the second planning day, the staff had become an effective group from whose interaction had emerged a design—fixed for the first evening, tentative for the next day. Alternatives, including a variety of learning exercises, had been identified by the staff in case Friday evening's session should suggest design modifications.

To obtain as much heterogeneity as possible, participants were assigned to small groups. Two staff members were to work with each group, each pair representing a balance of experience and view-

point. Individuals agreed to take responsibility for parts of the program requiring theory input or orientation for the entire workshop.

THE WORKSHOP

An opening dialogue among the staff re-created events leading to the workshop. From that point, the first evening moved along quickly as groups and parts of groups proceeded through a series of participant and observer experiences. These experiences achieved certain ends. They (1) began opening up communication within the groups, (2) initiated early awareness of group process, and (3) supplied data for the staff in assessing and revising the design.

A post-session staff meeting produced new insights. Apparently a representative socioeconomic sampling of the community was present, even though the large majority of enrollees represented the articulate and active sector (e.g., lawyers, middle-class homemakers, businessmen, educators). Living in different villages, many were not acquainted, in spite of similar economic and social characteristics.

It was apparent that only certain people were heard in the small groups that evening. Sharing of leadership was rare. One person could easily make an uncontested decision for his group. Disagreement was avoided, especially when tension reached a point of near explosion. The airing of all facts and all opinions was curtailed.

One recurring way of avoiding disagreement was simply not to hear a dissenting voice. Divergent questions or opinions which might give a different perspective hung in midair as the subject was quickly changed or the majority point of view elaborated. A frequently heard expression emphasized that the "professional" must hand programs down to those lower on the social and economic scale.

The following day's training events attempted to get at some of these issues. Through a simulation exercise participants explored the difficulties and concerns relevant to reaching consensus, to utilizing all available resources, to listening and participating.

A technique for analyzing problems, known as Force Field Analysis, was introduced. This is adapted from Kurt Lewin's theory that in any social problem there are both "driving and restraining forces" holding the situation in uneasy balance.¹ The groups, choosing their own perceived community problems, practiced pinpointing as many factors as possible impinging on an issue.

¹Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory and Social Science* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1951).

"Homework" for the next weekend involved an exercise which demonstrated a more complete method of problem analysis.

THE SECOND WEEKEND

For the second weekend participants shared community problem diagnoses, and continued working as groups to select potential action projects for post-workshop efforts. This evolved at the final session into operating as one workshop "community" to select areas of concern on which all could work. These areas were (1) improving communications and public relations, (2) developing leaders, (3) searching for methods to determine what projects seem important to all the people in Craggs, and (4) coordinating efforts.

Seated in a large circle during the closing session, participants and staff asked questions and discussed next steps: Where do we go from here? How do we use the objectives we've identified? Are they the main objectives? How can we make this an ongoing effort? Half the total group (17) expressed their wish to continue to "probe for community" in the county; thus, an ongoing steering committee was born.

Further conscious and cooperative efforts to increase participation, develop a more open climate, and begin working as a community on the county's almost overpowering problems would rest almost entirely with the 17. County Extension educators would serve as resources.

ESTIMATE OF IMPACT

A glance at this superficial description of the design suggests that impact of a workshop of this kind is difficult to assess; many significant outcomes may not manifest themselves until long afterward. If the committee of 17 makes further efforts, it will be easier at some future point to see if individual insights or group processes initiated at the workshop have had any effect on the quality of life in Craggs.

It was clear to the staff that people who were strangers—some of them sharing the same occupation (the ministry, for example)—began trying to communicate authentically during those two weekends. At least two or three of the participants came away with a vision of what community development might entail—judging by their comments at the end of the workshop. Several articulated a wish for a follow-up experience, hopefully with others added who were not present and whose presence seemed desirable (e.g., the local editor, elected officials).

We know that several citizens ended the workshop on a pessimistic note, disappointed that the staff had not given them specific solutions for the community's problems. They had not recognized that the solutions—or some at least—lie among themselves and others in the county. One person hinted at this: "How do we expect to get others involved, when we ourselves have difficulty devoting parts of two weekends to a concerted effort of this kind?"

This remark and other events and comments are evidence, too, that resemblances between reality in Craggs and reality at the workshop were not missed. For example: The outcome of the simulation exercise—where lone dissenting voices, unheard at the time, proved to have been correct—was analogous to the way community groups often make decisions. And during the final session it became apparent to some that the "consensus" reached on the county's three major problems was only superficial. Dissenting voices had apparently not been heard and the passage of time had not strengthened agreement.

Two months after the workshop one of the Craggs Extension agents reported that "the program has accomplished something. People are still talking about it. Some who did not attend the workshop, but have heard about it, are taking part in community activities in which they have never before participated. The committee of 17 is planning a meeting to talk about a follow-up program." (The committee has since met to plan another workshop for "alumni" of the first session and additional citizens.)

As to the impact on the workshop staff, we are on surer ground in terms of reaching some of the explicit staff goals. During the planning period and the workshop itself, the climate had become open enough for staff members to be quite honest with one another. Thus, at the post-workshop staff meeting, a mixture of positive and negative feelings was expressed concerning outcomes of the workshop on participants and on selves.

STAFF REACTIONS

A few members, in addition, later made an effort to evaluate the experience in writing. Reactions were not uniform. These quotes from staff reports define the gamut of reactions:

. . . Basically, participants left feeling that what was needed was for them to go into the communities of Craggs County, involve people in dialogues designed to explore common concerns; to formulate problems, develop solutions through shared leadership, honest sharing of view-

points and feelings, and implement projects seen as relevant by the people themselves. . . . However, success is by no means assured. . . .

. . . I am anxious to know if the changes in these participants will function in future program development and problem-solving activities in Craggs County. This will be the best means of evaluating the program. I had some reservations when I left. I felt that participants went home feeling frustrated and in doubt as to where to go from here. Personally, I would like to have had the participants go home feeling good about the entire experience and having a sense of direction. My question is—How do you do this? I tend to feel that community leaders such as those at the workshop want something quite tangible from a training experience such as this.

. . . As I look back at my apprehensions, I am amazed how our staff, as well as the participants, responded to the freedom and flexibility built into the program. . . . Some members of the staff were frustrated. . . . Perhaps the frustration stemmed from beginning to feel on the edge of engaging in an entire new way of helping. To most this is frightening and exciting at the same time. . . . Yet, with all of these fears and frustrations, I see in the Craggs County endeavor the beginning of a unique model for community education within the Appalachian Center and through communities of West Virginia. It is unique because of the dual aspect of additional training of staff members while helping communities to identify their problems.

FLAWS

Although our enthusiasm for the Craggs training program is evident, we need to point out a number of weaknesses.

1. Lack of sufficient time: Altogether the workshop ran less than three days, separated by a week into two segments. Three consecutive days would have been a happy minimum for creating the group cohesiveness and permissive climate needed to encourage greater openness in communication and problem solving.
2. Insufficient distance from participants' homes: Though a quiet place, the training site was too near home for the participants to get a real sense of seclusion. Some did not even stay overnight. Attendance fluctuated.
3. Less than a maximum mix to represent all segments of the population: Though great effort was made to bring in more of the "poor," attitudes akin to those existing in the community inhibited people from one stratum from attending a meeting also attended by citizens from another stratum. In terms of geographical divisiveness of the county, however, a good cross-section was present, along with a sprinkling of the disadvantaged.

4. Not enough attention to staff learning: Characteristically, we became so engrossed in the task of planning and implementing the workshop that we took relatively little time to elaborate staff gains. Even after the training had been finished, evaluating staff performance tended to be treated as an afterthought.

CONCLUSION

By describing and assessing one experiment, we have tried to provide some insight into an approach which combines staff and community leadership development. In this approach both citizen and educator learn primarily from "doing," or participating and examining their experience. Perhaps the greatest problem encountered in this kind of training is that the effort seems so small in proportion to the needs in both community and staff development. It is, indeed, not a fast, magical method of attacking either prong of the dilemma.

Ideally, on the community development side, a need exists for follow-up. Staff members with interest and skills in community development should allocate time to "nurturing" local leaders until they are self-assured enough to assume more responsibility. County personnel are overtaxed with "conventional" program requirements. Even if time were available, many of them still feel they lack the complex competencies needed to face the issues alone. More community development specialists to backstop, encourage, and train these professionals would be of inestimable help.

As for staff development, the results of the approach described are becoming apparent. Though the number who can be involved in a single effort is relatively small, in several undertakings of this kind ten per cent of the West Virginia University Extension staff have already had experience in one or more such projects. At this writing five additional staff-community leadership development projects have been initiated, two of which involved both adults and teenagers. A cadre is now available to man new programs and to help train colleagues with less experience.

We hesitate to generalize from this case or to make sweeping assertions. Yet we are hopeful. Proposals for other community-centered projects loom ahead. As each is staffed, a mix will be achieved in which more and less experienced Extension educators will work together, sharing responsibility and expanding insights. With this growing cadre of developing professionals, we believe the impact of the University's field faculty on planned community change in West Virginia will increase geometrically.