

Experiments in Dialogue

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Communication continues to be one of the most serious problems facing Extension people. Why aren't community agencies better able to work together? Why is there mistrust among agencies? The author reports on a three-day communication laboratory conducted by the Extension Service for representatives from various community agencies. Several sensitivity exercises were used to identify communication problems and strengthen interpersonal communication skills. Providing leadership for community dialogue may be one of the new roles for Extension.

The woman closed her eyes and let her partner guide her around the conference room. Although told to trust his directions, she couldn't resist checking her surroundings every few steps. As an executive of a powerful county agency and accustomed to making decisions, she found it almost impossible to rely on someone else's judgment.

Traveling gingerly around the same room, 30 other "blind" delegates moved through the first exercise of a communication training laboratory for staff and board members of health and welfare agencies in one of New Jersey's largest counties. Like the woman above, each was learning something important about himself and his relationship to others. This was one of the sensitivity exercises done to develop trust and better communication.

The Communication Laboratory

Conducted by the county Extension Service of Rutgers University, this three-day laboratory was designed to help community leaders recognize their interdependence and learn to plan together for change. By confronting and evaluating each other's ideas and personalities, they opened new areas of cooperation in a county riddled with "communication gaps."

The objectives of the laboratory were:

1. To identify barriers to agency communication.
2. To define established collaborative areas.
3. To strengthen interpersonal communication skills.
4. To develop and extend inter-agency communication.

5. To develop specific steps for follow-up implementation.
6. To strengthen the role of the Health and Welfare Council in its effort to promote better and more extensive services to the public.

Believing laboratory training offers a most effective tool in meeting the goals of extension education in the 70s, which focus on human resources, I designed and conducted this program using the services of a consultant from Block-Petrella Associates, an organizational development firm of Plainfield, New Jersey.

A Setting for Crisis

Previously this New Jersey county seemed a poor candidate for experiments in dialogue. Regionalism and rapid expansion were causing communication breakdowns in county government, industry, and transportation. Most seriously affected, however, was social services.

The health and welfare agencies were as varied as the changing needs that produced them. They ranged from small local service centers to large countywide planning structures. Some had acquired extensive political and financial support, while others lacked both "connections" and funds. A few served the general public, but most limited their concern to a specific client group (aged, ill, poor).

These agencies seldom joined forces. Fearful of losing independent credit for programs, they wasted and duplicated each other's

efforts. By refusing to compare notes, agency directors created gaps as well as overlaps in county services. Thus clients, not executives, paid for failures in agency communication.

The Extension laboratory wasn't the first attempt to stimulate agency cooperation. For years, the county's Health and Welfare Council had sponsored interagency task forces and study groups. Because it's an advisory body with a volunteer director, the council was able to muster only token enthusiasm. The communication born at conference tables seemed short lived and superficial.

By the time the council, under forceful new leadership, approached Extension for assistance, an honest agency confrontation was clearly in order. All county health and welfare organizations were issued invitations to help "develop and extend interagency communication." Laboratory mailings stressed the fact that sessions wouldn't be lectures, but would require continuous attendance and *active* participation.

The Crisis Confronted

Curiosity and genuine concern combined to give the three-day session a healthy registration. Delegates from ages 25 to 65 came from large planning units such as the Department of Health, United Fund, Jewish Welfare Council, and from smaller service agencies, community action programs, rehabilitation centers, Planned Parenthood offices.

During the first day of exercises, it became apparent that the conflict between planning and service functions was a major stumbling block to interagency cooperation. Even within single agencies, misunderstanding between board "planners" and executive "doers" short-circuited effective communication. Most younger delegates were active in client services, while planners were older men and women no longer involved in direct service. Thus a "generation gap" widened the gulf between agency planners and doers!

Such conflicts were encouraged, rather than suppressed. Training exercises provided a carefully controlled atmosphere in which delegates felt free to voice frustrations and resentment. Confrontation led to cooperation on group tasks. As one young delegate said later: "It's a lot easier to get down to work once you've gotten things off your chest."

Persuading agency representatives to work together, even on simulated laboratory tasks, required patient preparation. Based on a sound knowledge of human behavior and nonverbal exercises, like the blind walk described earlier, relaxed participants demonstrated the complex ways people affect one another without words.

In addition to wordless messages, first-day tasks explored verbal communication. Delegates were divided into two groups: observers and participant communicators. Under a trained leader's guidance, communicators were invited to dis-

cuss a given subject, while observers studied their interaction.

As they viewed the communication process, observers were quick to notice the confusion caused by "lazy" communicators.

"Why," one observer asked, "do we always assume others know what we're talking about? It's one of the biggest mistakes we can make."

This speaker, the board president of a large agency, drew hearty applause from his executive director.

"All right," the board president added smiling, "that *we* includes *me!*"

A Serious Game

Second-day exercises began with a provocative assignment. As the health and welfare professionals of imaginary "Sucha County," delegates were divided into four working groups: health, education, welfare, and social services. Each group was to develop a budget for its portion of the \$1,000,000 proposal. After designing and budgeting separate programs, all 4 groups were to agree on a single, comprehensive proposal, totaling no more than \$1,000,000, for submission to a foundation.

Although careful planning had gone into constructing this task, laboratory leaders had no way of predicting its outcome. The exercise was guided and supervised by the delegates themselves. Sensing their responsibility and aware of the implications for "back-home" operations, conferees tackled the problem with enthusiasm.

As the four groups designed their programs, agency planners dominated budget discussions. Used to projecting expenses, they were coldly practical in their insistence that all ideas be financially defined. Confronted for the first time with the economic facts of life, doers recognized the impossibility of meeting all needs at once. Slowly, the doers began to appreciate the administrative complexities they'd always dismissed as "red tape."

Planners, too, learned lessons. Working side by side with doers, they soon found themselves viewing services in terms of the individual clients who'd receive them. When one group decided to centralize facilities, its doers urged a preliminary study of transportation problems. When another group prepared to launch countywide programs, doers suggested they take into account ethnic and neighborhood differences. Sharing plans with doers, the planners decided, wasn't only democratic . . . it was practical!

When the time came to coordinate all four group plans into one proposal, delegates made some disheartening discoveries. Three of the 4 groups had designed programs requiring the *full* \$1,000,000! "If you ask for a little, you'll get less," one budget-battle veteran had warned his group.

In addition to ignoring each other's budget needs, groups found they'd duplicated programs. By failing to compare notes, their separate projects wasted facilities and personnel that might easily have

been combined. "We wanted to come up with the best program," explained a disappointed delegate. "We couldn't let everyone know what we were up to!"

Only one of the groups provided for interagency cooperation. Its members proposed a series of multipurpose centers to be used by all agencies in the county. They also called for a democratic coalition of agency staffs and clients to develop center schedules. It was this plan, with slight revisions, which was adopted as the final grant proposal from Sucha County.

Doubts Are Raised

Would lessons learned in the laboratory be carried home? In a final evaluation of second-day sessions, delegates themselves raised that question. The recently appointed director of a large planning agency voiced his concern about good intentions. "It's human nature to look to your own interests first. It's easy for us to say *here* that we're going to share credit and ideas for the common interest. But once we're outside the protective environment of this laboratory, will we still feel so noble?"

Representatives from small service agencies agreed that theory was very different from practice. They were especially distrustful of lofty plans like those for the Sucha County agency-client coalition.

One woman suggested that in reality this "democratic" assembly seemed all words and no action, and

would probably reinforce old power structures. Small agencies and their clients might receive token representation, but agencies with influence and funds would actually determine programs. Could county-wide cooperation for the good of the clients be developed without the full support and involvement of all?

By the third day, such suspicions had blossomed into full-blown antagonisms. Morning exercises were characterized by repeated clashes between powerful planning agencies and smaller service units.

During one of these confrontations, the representatives of two large agencies were accused of ignoring small agency views. "You preach cooperation," an angry delegate told them, "yet you refuse to give up control by discussing specific programs with us." The two replied that it was difficult to work with small agencies concerned only with protecting their own interests.

Strangely enough, such heated exchanges cleared the decks for genuine cooperation. It was the last lab session that proved to be the most productive interagency exercise.

As their final assignment, all 32 delegates were asked to take a long, hard look at the future. Many saw disaster if present trends continued.

"We've gone our own merry ways for too long," one woman said. "We've all put agency identification above county needs, and we had better stop before our clients lose out completely."

Shaken at being pictured as

power-hungry tyrants, large agency executives agreed to involve small agencies in their planning. Equally surprised to be seen as selfish and narrow-minded, small agency staff resolved to look beyond their own methodologies and programs.

The best way to meet county needs, everyone agreed, was to keep communication lines open. By secret ballot, a small interagency committee was chosen to meet regularly with the Health and Welfare Council to arrange for more training and a reevaluation of the organizational structure. Composed of both planners and doers, old and young, funded and floundering, this eight-man committee was truly a democratic coalition. It was also proof that delegates *could* put theories into practice.

The Future

At the initial meeting of this committee, the Extension's lab students first applied their lessons in cooperation to a real-life situation. At the next annual meeting, small agency representation was elected to the board of the Health and Welfare Council.

If past community development projects are any indication, these lessons will be well remembered, and will lead to additional labs, recognizing that working together requires ongoing training.

Two years ago, an Extension encounter between old and young members of one northern New Jersey community prompted the for-

mation of the organization, "Youth and Adults for Community Action." More recent confrontations between blacks and whites and among students, parents, and teachers have proved equally effective in dealing with attitudes and value conflicts in drug use and institutional racism in other New Jersey communities. Both need the support of follow-up programs.

Hopefully, these creative encounters will soon be repeated in different forms throughout the state, helping leaders build effective teams for community improvement and planning for change.

As urban growth shrinks our world and complicates group relations, Extension services everywhere will begin to explore the full potential of such laboratories. Once concerned only with improving the quality of individual life by bringing technology to rural settings, Extension must now stimulate effective use of human technology in urban environments. With applied behavioral sciences as the tool, modern Extension services are changing the quality of group and community life for all.

As the focus of Extension efforts shift from technology to communication, the number of specialists in community development will increase. Acting as an unobtrusive catalyst rather than a high-pressure expert, this professional sparks dialogue in communities that have outgrown talk and exposes new skills for effective community leadership.

If he has done his job well, the community development specialist will be rewarded with conversations like this one that followed the Sucha County laboratory:

"That was hard work," one delegate sighed. "I'm all talked out, but I've learned something about myself and my agency."

"I guess we all did," his companion replied. "What's more important, we learned it together. I have a feeling that's going to make working together a whole lot easier!"

Far from a solution to the complex problems in developing human resources, laboratory training adds a new way to help people help themselves. Some say this can open a Pandora's box in terms of the feelings and hostilities released in the laboratory environment. Because of this concern, careful planning and skillful professionals are necessary.

This description is only one aspect of the laboratory, which included other exercises to help members confront issues and people. It's important to determine and understand in advance what the goals of any particular laboratory experience are and to design interactions to meet the particular goals.

Thus, a word of caution . . . this is no panacea. Be sure you do plan carefully, your goals are clear, and those responsible are experienced, trained, and skilled professionals. With these ingredients, optimum possibilities for success are present.