Consulting in Staff Development

MILTON S. BYAM

Consulting in staff development is the process of advising an institution on those steps needed to provide its staff an opportunity to develop their potential and increase both their talent and skill. The consultant reviews the philosophy, procedures and techniques of the institution which indicate the library administrators' degree of awareness of the importance of staff development.

The consultant begins, after an interview with the director, with the staff, preferably those at the very bottom of the "pecking order." Through the library's appearance and the alertness of its staff, the consultant can discern almost at a glance everything he needs to know about the library, though not necessarily about its program for staff development. One talks to staff about charging systems, book shelving, library cleaning, or anything that will reveal attitudes, knowledge and opportunities for growth.

At this step one is simply exploring the knowledge of the staff members regarding the institution's rules and regulations and their applicability to them. Such knowledge or lack of it does not in itself indicate institutional success or failure, though it may relate to the processes by which such information has been transmitted.

The institution may, for example, in all good faith make provision for the transmission of information through letters, memoranda, staff newsletters, and oral direction, and yet may fail to transmit anything that does not require confirmation by the "grapevine." This is espe-

Milton S. Byam recently retired as Director of the Queens Borough Public Library, New York.
cially true in very large organizations. Memoranda may be unclear or seem to contradict other orders. The wrong form of dissemination may be used to convey complicated directions, through numbers of supervisors, for example. The consultant will examine the memoranda issued and their success in achieving results with the supervisors required to implement them, and will suggest alternative forms and techniques for accomplishing the desired goals.

After the interview step (which is carried through at all levels of the organization) the consultant is ready to study in depth the techniques used by the organization in developing its staff. Staff development is not, after all, a one-step process but a multifaceted one. It is not a one-day happening but continuous. It does not end even when a staff member has resigned or retired or been separated. The aroma of an institution which a staff member carries into the outside world creates, good or poor conditions for adding employees in the future. The consultant must, therefore, study:

1. the organization's rules and regulations;
2. the process of staff intake;
3. orientation programs;
4. training programs;
5. the process of performance evaluations;
6. the techniques of promotions, transfers, salary increases; and
7. methods of staff separation.

The Organization's Rules and Regulations: Procedure Manuals

There should be a manual which clearly spells out the philosophy and aims of the personnel practices within the institution. It must be stated in writing, for example, that one-half hour is allowed for lunch and that this is the rule for everybody, with exceptions clearly spelled out. Here it is imperative that fairness and honesty are evident and that safeguards are included which assure the staff that written regulations cannot be undone by unwritten practices guided by subterfuge or self-interest.

The minimal personnel manual, therefore, concentrates on practices universally applicable to all within the institution, with emphasis on hours of work, schedules, breaks (if any), staff meeting times, emergency allowances, benefits available, and in some cases, specific departmental rules within the overall institutional umbrella.

The manual may seem wildly at variance with comments garnered
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from the staff. Some regulations may have been superseded without having been rewritten; some may have been ignored and never applied since they were written. While these are danger signals, they are not necessarily a sign of failure, for what the consultant is looking for is honesty, consistency and flexibility in the organization’s rules and their application. Honesty means that the rules are applied with justice to all employees, so that if a subaltern must make up five minutes of late time, upper-echelon staff must also do the same. Consistency means the existence of a clear line of reason throughout the rules, so that one knows that whenever he is late he is expected to make up the time, exceptions being made only by administrative fiat in emergencies of one sort or another. Flexibility means the opportunity to provide for emergencies such as snowstorms or hurricanes or for the more mundane breakdowns in transportation.

To the consultant, the differences between the manual and the staff’s perception of the rules and regulations are less important than whether principles of honesty, consistency and flexibility are being applied. The consultant should point out, however, that the institution would be better served by a manual which clearly and accurately states its guidelines for action.

Staff Intake: The Beginning of Misunderstandings

The hiring process begins long before a staff member is even considered for employment. There is a self-selection process always at work around any institution which causes some people to want to work for it. One aspect of this process is proximity; another is that a relative works there. The self-selection process is also influenced by former employees who describe their jobs as having been easy or their years at the institution as happy ones, or who consider the benefits good. And while all of these may be true statements for the individual making them, they do not really describe the job and are, therefore, misrepresentations which create the first opportunity for misunderstanding, employee complaints and morale problems later on.

Absolute care and accuracy must consequently be employed at each step of the hiring process to eliminate misunderstandings. This is done by spelling out the institution’s needs in writing and advertising the position. It is advisable to advertise both internally (to take advantage of internal skills and referrals from the staff) and externally (to take advantage of the larger market outside the institution). If it is a temporary position, this should be clearly stated. Hours of work, salary, benefits,
and skills and/or education required for the job must be equally clearly spelled out.

This is but the beginning of the process, which includes applications, interviews, assignment and title. All kinds of pitfalls exist between the advertising and the hiring which determine the kind of staff that will exist to do the job required. A staff may be ingrown because the hiring process has depended wholly on staff referrals. Persons may have chosen an institution because of its rapid promotions, and such rapidity of promotion may no longer be possible. Others may have chosen an institution because of its reputation as a place where staff are left unsupervised, or are given special training—and the administrator responsible for these conditions has left. Each of these unrealized hopes, as well as an infinite variety of others, can leave a residue of bitterness in individuals who were hired for the job and find it is not what they had expected. While, indeed, no such promise had been made, the application and interview process had failed to distinguish the candidates with unrealistic expectations from candidates with real ones. Indeed, sometimes interviewers themselves are so impressed by the qualities of a candidate that they will go to any lengths to recruit him, even though they know the institution cannot provide the candidate’s hoped-for goals. Or, perhaps they simply have not considered this problem.

The staff development consultant should therefore review the techniques employed in recruiting staff and comment on the institution’s accuracy and care in eliminating misunderstandings. Does the institution acquire the best people available, or does it collect an ingrown staff loaded with relatives and friends of existing employees? Nepotism should also be examined. Affirmative action should not only be the policy of the institution, but all staff should be aware of its existence and the reasons for it. The consultant in his report should comment on the hiring practices used and the success derived from them, including staff perceptions of them.

At this juncture it should be pointed out that many interviewees, by the very nature of the hiring process, hear only what they want to hear. They are determined to get the job, and little can dissuade them from having it offered to them. The burden is thus on the interviewer to select the person who has the qualifications, can do the job, and will be able to develop within the environment of that particular institution.

Orientation: You Never Told Me

One of the areas about which library staff almost universally com-
plain is that of orientation. They generally claim they never had one. They were never told that they would be required to work nights or Saturdays. They were never told their pay could be reduced for absences and lateness. This is obviously an area of much misunderstanding and ill will. On the other hand, supervisors report that of course, there had been an orientation, but the staff just did not recognize it as such.

Orientation is the formal indoctrination of a staff member to a new work situation. It should always be formal and labeled as such. A large institution may provide two, three or even four such orientation sessions. For example, at the institutional level, one should be told about paydays and payroll deductions, at the departmental level about transfers and promotions, at the unit level about schedules and work practices, and at the section level about methods of doing overdues or charging books. Although these orientations may run from fifteen minutes to two hours each, they should all be formal.

Upon a new person’s arrival at his unit, the pressures on him are generally too heavy to put him to work immediately. He is often foisted on the unit supervisor instead of being oriented in toto. The head of the department should have a conference with each new staff member, show him his locker and his work station, spell out the department rules, introduce him to all the staff and even take him to lunch. It is important for a new staff member to learn all he needs to know at the beginning of employment so that he will not be required to unlearn things at a later date. He will thus have a chance to develop.

A consultant should review the orientation procedures of the institution both for quantity and quality. His conversations with the staff, while important in assessing staff efficacy, should not be the only determinant. All too often the staff is given so much information in so many forms that it confuses them. It may be that a simple staff handbook, to be read as needed and issued annually, will remove most of the orientation problems and provide needed clarity.

Orientation is neither easy nor inexpensive. An institution which manages to accomplish it well should be given high points for seeking to resolve the problems inherent in orienting staff to the organization. One that fails cannot be condemned if, indeed, all the trappings of a formal orientation program do exist.

Training: Now You Tell Me!

Nowhere in staff development are there likely to be more howls of dismay than with staff training. Like orientation, this is often treated
perfunctorily by the unit heads, although some libraries provide extensive centralized training sessions for some staff. Library schools like to think that they send professionals fully trained to the hiring libraries. This is not so. All staff require training so that they can perform intelligently as members of the institution as well as carry out assigned duties in the unit. Again, staff training is best done formally so that it is dignified and recognized as such. The practices of "tell, show, let do, and revise" should be carried through all functions until the staff member performs them perfectly. If he is turned over to another staff member for training, then one must be absolutely certain what that staff member is capable of teaching and how he will go about it.

Every staff member accepts and understands the need for training. He won't be bored with it as he might be with orientation, unless he thoroughly understands the job already. He will grasp it with eagerness, for his self-development and self-esteem depend on it. A consultant should look at the training given, the techniques employed, and the quality of the trainers when evaluating the staff development program of an institution. If the program is a good one, then the evidence will be a heavy turnover of good staff getting better jobs and long-staying staff happy with what they are doing.

Training encompasses more than the opportunities provided within the library for staff development. There are plentiful opportunities for continuing education which may be either provided by the employer or supported by the employer and provided by outside organizations. The library may provide workshops to improve technical or managerial skills, such as storytelling or supervision. It may provide time for attendance at conferences or workshops on the local scene or at professional conventions, such as the American Library Association's, or it may provide opportunities and funds for pertinent courses given, for example, by the American Management Associations or local colleges and universities.

By conversing with staff and reviewing the procedures manual, the consultant will investigate the provision made for continuing education. Supervisors may indicate their interest in such training while the manual is silent on the subject. A review must therefore be made of the number of staff provided such opportunities over a measured period. The kinds of courses involved and the amount of institutional expenditure should also be examined. Caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions from the data gathered, however, since there is no absolute figure which might be suggested for continuing education. Moreover, opportunities may be provided with little or no staff interest being evidenced in taking advantage of them.
Performance Evaluations: Report Card or Development Tool?

The performance evaluation, service rating or staff evaluation is the most valuable staff development tool in personnel work—if used properly. It can be a self-development device unless it is used as a report card or for purposes of determining promotability. When used as a report card it becomes a weapon, since it can be used to demean, outrage or destroy the psyche of an individual.

As a developmental tool, it is *sans pareil* in providing staff the opportunity to improve. There are thousands of appropriate forms for staff evaluation on the market. The form does not matter except that staff must agree that it is applicable to their jobs. The form should be brought to the staff member’s attention on the day of orientation at the organizational level at which the evaluation will be made. After the staff member has worked a month, a conference should be held to review his work, at which time he should be told how he is seen in terms of the evaluation form. He should also be told when a formal evaluation will be made. Another conference on progress should be held in the second month, but now he should be given an evaluation “in pencil” for review and comments, again with indications as to when the formal rating will be done. This should be done each month until the formal rating is made so that he has a chance to improve.

These conferences are held for the purpose of providing the supervisor an opportunity to give a staff member guidance, as well as to listen to what the staff member has to say. If evaluations of the staff member are critical, he may be expected to react with anger, unhappiness or even despair. From that moment he will not hear anything being said. The purpose of the performance evaluation is to make the staff member clearly understand what he is being told about himself and the changes needed to improve his performance. If he stops listening, the supervisor should be aware of this and seek ways to bring him back to the discussion. If this fails, the interview should be abandoned and another rescheduled a week later.

The staff member should then be given the completed evaluation forms to review in privacy and asked to return to discuss it. The supervisor must listen carefully to be aware of all the nuances of the bitterness which may pour out and seek an opportunity for their correction. For example, a staff member may be distracted from performance by slurs, racial or otherwise, by staff members not speaking to him, by assignment to a job he doesn't like, or by the supervisor. The supervisor must avoid being distracted by personal likes and dislikes from the individual’s performance being evaluated. Dress, speech or other habits may
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annoy the supervisor so much that he forgets what he is evaluating. He therefore may insist on changing the individual instead of providing an opportunity for development. For example, loud, tasteless dress may meet the library dress code but cause comment by staff and public alike. It would be helpful to point this out without making it paramount to the performance evaluation. Staff development depends on a supervisor who can discern problems and correct them with subtlety and grace.

It is imperative in consulting in staff development that, when forms are examined, the attitudes of the administrators and supervisors toward evaluations be reviewed, as well as the techniques employed in evaluation. An employer who does not use appraisal forms is failing the staff by not providing this valuable tool for self-development. Most people come to work without ever having had objective criticism of their performance other than their mothers' comments about "sloppiness." The performance evaluation is a revelation to them—unless it is used as a report card.

Promotions, Transfers, Salary Increases: Living With Your Job

Each employee looks at the other persons on the job, especially those supervising him, and is sure that he deserves a promotion. Sometimes, he simply compares his salary to another staff member's and feels that promotion is due. In some cases, his wife is having a baby, and that is sufficient reason. All such considerations, of course, miss the point. Promotions are rewards for successful self-development that require higher levels of skill and competency and therefore lead to higher salary.

One cannot prevent the staff from misconstruing the purpose of promotions, but promotions can be made a source of high—rather than low—morale by making certain that the procedure's objectivity is apparent. Absolute objectivity is, of course, impossible in any endeavor which involves mankind, but one must devise procedures which at least approximate it. Written examinations can be given, oral examinations can be required before an internal panel or board or before an outside panel, or promotion can be on seniority. However it is done, the staff must believe it is fair and equitable, and the library must move the employee best able to do the job into the open position. Objectivity begins at the selection process. All qualified employees must have access to the next higher step, no matter who dislikes them. Screening can eliminate unqualified applicants, who are told why they have been eliminated. Performance evaluation and sick leave records might then be scanned, and those employees objectively found to be below par eliminated and told why. All of the others might go to examination.
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Since promotion is a tremendous incentive toward self-development, a consultant should review promotion procedures in considering staff development. His review should look for objectivity and staff awareness of that objectivity. The consultant must be aware, however, that every staff member can point to some individual he feels should not have been promoted. It should be pointed out that this very situation intensifies the need for objectivity.

Since promotion represents an opportunity for the library's staff to grow, the consultant will also be interested in promotional opportunities filled from outside the institution. Closing off opportunities which are not really opportunities rankles the existing staff. The consultant will examine all persons at levels above entry positions to determine if their status was the result of promotion or appointment. Checking all promotions made within a reasonable period should provide the necessary information about practices employed. Still, all advanced appointments may not, and indeed in some cases must not, be from within. The question continues to be one of objectivity and opportunity. Therefore, internal staff should be given the opportunity by internal advertisement to fill the positions. If no qualified staff members surface, then one should go outside rather than promote an unqualified person. A consultant's examination of promotional activity should provide these overviews.

Separation: You're Always With Us

Development of staff depends on the integrity of the institution and its continued interest even in those who leave its employ. People leave employment for numerous reasons, including better work, higher pay, or a spouse's relocation; some stay until retirement. A few, unfortunately, are fired or asked to resign. No matter what the reason for termination, the institution has contracted a debt that it will continue to pay long after the staff member has left. There will be demands for information about former employees which should be answered quickly and courteously. There will be requests for references which should receive the most positive response possible so as not to deny former employees opportunities for new employment elsewhere. (Employees who have been dismissed for theft should be told not to seek recommendations for employment as a cashier, for example.)

There should also be an exit interview during which the employer has a last chance to respond to gripes and rub off the edges of bruised or hurt feelings. Moreover, the employer should seek this opportunity to place in proper perspective the accidents and failures of the institution.
One wants every employee, however separated, to promote the institution, to create a positive climate about employment there. As a result, a consultant reviewing staff development at an institution should be concerned with the separation process both as a technique and procedure. Former staff members should be contacted to determine their perceptions of their former employer and its response to their needs both during and after employment.

The consultant should examine all separations from the organization, for whatever reason, over a 5-year period. Turnover is one of the matters of concern, but the reasons for separation are of equal importance. Death, poor health, relocation of spouse, better job offers, retirement and involuntary separation constitute the bulk of the reasons for separations. None of these may be indications of institutional failure, unless there is an unusual incidence of one or more factors. For example, too many involuntary separations may indicate poor hiring policies or poor working conditions. No involuntary separations may indicate that deadweight is being kept on without regard to performance. An unusual incidence of health-related separations may be masks for other reasons or indicate practices that encourage the hiring of older persons. The consultant should therefore review the separations and evaluate the techniques and procedures used in handling them.

Summary

Consulting in staff development is therefore a process in which the perceptions of the staff are gathered together with factual data and compared with those of the institution to come up with a set of new facts useful in improving its program. The institution has indicated its desire for improvement by hiring the consultant. He should provide that help without becoming involved in championing staff views or furthering vendettas.

A good staff development program would presumably have resulted in the proper preparations, the hiring of appropriate skilled personnel, their adequate orientation and training, and their evaluation. Difficult personalities, even at the administrative level, should have been corrected. Nonapplication and misapplication of rules and regulations would have been eliminated. If indeed these adjustments have been made, then one should see high morale, increased productivity and less in-fighting.

This article has not tried to be definitive about personnel practices, but simply to cite a few as examples. The consultant would consider the
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seven areas discussed above, but would review practice in more detail than could be cited here.

Reference

1. A search of the literature yielded no articles on consulting in staff development.