

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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Participation & Involvement: A Community College Transforms Its Culture

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As part of Lane Community College's effort to develop a more participative culture, a two-day performance-based training program was designed to teach observable skills in conflict resolution and group process. Every employee of the college was invited to participate: faculty, management, and classified. Two hundred and twenty employees have participated in the training. A representative sample participated in the study. The longitudinal research extended over a three-year period beginning six months after the training began. A multi-method research design was used: statistical survey, interviews, and direct observation. The results suggest a substantial cultural shift in which employees are more direct in their communication and more effective at solving problems collaboratively. This article describes the key details of the training program as well as the results and outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

For nearly a decade, Lane Community College has been involved in an institution-wide "restructuring" process designed to prepare the college to respond to changing times including becoming increasingly learner-centered. In 1994, President Jerry Moskus sent all Lane employees a document spelling out the characteristics of the "New Lane." His words gave shape to the new direction: "To continue to be a strong, effective

community college, Lane must rethink nearly everything it does, and every staff member will need to consider how to perform his/her job in new ways that are more efficient and effective." This charge was combined with a continued emphasis on staff training at Lane. The emphasis, however, changed from one that had focused almost entirely on individual development to one that sought to develop an organizational capacity to respond to needed changes through teamwork and participation that cut across all employee groups.

ASSESSMENT

A survey was developed to discover how often people at the college were using the skills targeted in the training and what the general outcome had been. To help interpret the questionnaire results, interviews were held with people from across the college. Employees were interviewed over a three-year period. Researchers also observed group meetings over a two-year period to record the extent to which group facilitation and problem solving skills were being used in actual work situations.

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

A training program was developed to teach conflict resolution and consensus skills to all faculty and staff at the college. The purpose was to prepare them with the skills and competencies for a more involved culture. The intervention spanned a three-year period. The curriculum is built around two key dimensions of teamwork: interpersonal conflict resolution and group decision making and problem solving. The goal of the interpersonal component is to develop among all members of the college community the ability and desire to address and discuss any issue directly, no matter how charged it might be. The objective of the group process component is to teach skills for solving problems creatively and collaboratively. In the

conflict resolution curriculum, four sets of skills are taught: responding to criticism non-defensively, raising delicate issues, perception checking, and the power of encouragement and recognition. In the group process curriculum, participants learn how to use group facilitation skills for achieving quality consensus solutions to controversial issues. Each of these modules is taught through a behavioral shaping process which includes direct instruction, behavior modeling, written practice, and behavior rehearsal.

The first phase, direct instruction, involves a brief presentation of the concepts underlying a particular skill. The purpose is to insure that participants understand exactly how and why the skill works. In the second phase, behavior modeling, instructors present role-play dramatizations based on situations and experiences described in pre-training interviews. The purpose is to model the action making up each skill set being taught. In the written practice phase, participants analyze a real-life situation and develop a written response using the target skill. During behavior rehearsal, individuals practice what they have written, in a role-play situation where they get immediate feedback from a neutral observer. This behavioral shaping model is designed to efficiently move learners from knowing to doing. Finally, a trainer-training program was instituted to provide a skilled corps of in-house training experts, representing every level and division of the college. The goal is to make the program an on-going part of the organizational culture.

RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

The following conclusions can be drawn:

- The majority of participants use the skills taught in the training. They are being more direct and less defensive.
- A sizable group of participants have changed their behavior as a result of the training. Skilled communication is becoming a more natural response.

- When the skills are put to use, the results are overwhelmingly positive.

When people use the skills, 64% report that the outcome is generally positive, 30% report a mixed response, and notably, none report a generally negative outcome. One person said, "There are many little opportunities daily that have just become 'the way' to handle things. It comes together as second nature now... It has definitely made me a better employee."

Four individual skills are being used significantly more than average: Raising Issues, Perception Checking, Praise and Recognition, and Consensus Building.

The skill for **Raising Issues** has clearly provided concrete steps for conflict resolution at the college. People appear to have changed their own process significantly in the way they raise issues. A faculty member said, "I have become more aware of my listening skills and more likely to stop and listen rather than rush full steam ahead with my own agenda. I ask more questions and stop to check more readily. I feel this is enhancing the quality of my interactions with others." A classified staff member said, "One result of the training is a feeling of courage because we have words to use in a difficult situation. I' One manager noted, "In the past, things might have become bigger than necessary and people would dwell on issues. Now problems are resolved more quickly." Another staff person spoke for many when she said, "I had a problem with a co-worker. On the surface we were polite but underneath there was a lot of hostility. I used the Raising Issues skills and set a new tone for our relationship and established a new norm for our interactions."

Perception Checking is the skill people seem to be most comfortable with, and the one most integrated into their behavioral repertoire. As one classified staff explained,

"Recently, when my supervisor gave me some work it appeared that he was angry. Rather than dwelling on this concern, I waited a bit and then approached him, using perception checking to find out if there was a problem. It turned out that he was just having a bad day."

Praise and Recognition is acknowledged as a frequently used skill at the college. One classified staff member indicated that by praising the faculty she works with, she has been able to improve their response time. "I was having difficulty receiving the monthly statistical reports on time. I decided to put each faculty member's name on the white board and as each turned in their report I wrote thank you next to their name on the board to publicly recognize them. Now they compete with each other to see who will get the first public thank you - and I get my work on time!" A number of people mentioned the Employee Recognition Gala, which was created by the college to encourage people to praise their colleagues publicly. The event is an open forum and employees say things about the individual being recognized.

People reported that meetings are more productive because **Group Facilitation Skills** are becoming second nature around the campus. A number of people have had an opportunity to be on a campus-wide shared decision-making team. One supervisor spoke for many when he said, "Since the training, I have noticed a real change in meetings at the college in general. They are more skillfully led, and participants are more skillful." Over a two-year period, researchers observed four different campus groups meeting in their natural work environment. Each group's skill level appeared to be related to the number of people within the group who had been formally trained. Sometimes, a trained and skilled facilitator had the ability to compensate for a group with less training and limited skill. Clearly, the most high performance groups were those where many of the participants were trained in using key

facilitation skills.

WHAT NEXT?

People indicated that training is now needed for intact work groups. Many observed that it was effective to conduct the initial training in mixed, inter-department groups because it created a safe environment, and that now an important next step is to follow up with the people who work together. People observe that training with intact work groups would enable those groups to work on real issues, and share a common language. There has also been strong sentiment that some type of refresher course is needed because so much material had been covered in such a short time.

Currently the college has addressed both of these issues by putting in place a trained group of internal facilitators who are providing both regularly scheduled courses as well as training designed for individual work units.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

For a community college to successfully achieve a team structure requires strong, fundamental communication skills and competencies. This calls for the development of learning modules to teach faculty, and classified employees, managers, a range of communication skills, from managing conflict to collaboratively solving problems. At a time when community colleges increasingly are bringing employees together in teams, it is crucial to understand the concrete communication behaviors that contribute to teamwork. As colleges continue their commitment to being learning communities they must discover ways to make that learning part of the fabric of the culture. Carefully conceived training in conflict resolution and group process can assist a community college to make such a cultural transformation.

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