Schools must learn to deal with dynamics of educational change

Surfacing teacher perceptions

By John Carlin and Robert E. Scott

Change is characteristic of our time. This characteristic demands that individuals and institutions deal effectively with change if they are to survive and flourish. The problems related to change are particularly acute for organizations serving the general public. These organizations are designed to respond to the needs of their publics and these needs are changing so fundamentally and rapidly that new structures, services and delivery systems are constantly demanded. The various educational systems serving the general public are certainly prime examples of organizations experiencing such demands related to change.

At the present time it is fair to say that local school systems are under attack. Put simply, taxpayers are demanding more and better quality services for their money. Therefore, alert local school systems are determinedly looking for effective ways to change their structures, services and delivery systems to meet the changing and expanding needs of their clients. Given this situation, schools must learn to deal more effectively with the demands for educational change.

Needs and Needs Assessment

In planning for change, an important first step is the identification of needs. A "need" can be defined as the measurable discrepancy (gap) between current outcomes (what is) and desired or required outcomes (what should be) (Kaufman, 1972). This definition underlies most of the needs assessment models currently in use.

With a "need" thus defined, a "needs assessment" can be described as a process designed to determine (1) a desired or required situation in the area being assessed, (2) the present or real situation, and (3) a priority ranking of the kinds and degree of discrepancies between (1) and (2) (Witkin, 1975; English and Kaufman, 1975).

Given this structure, a major task for model and process builders is to design activities and strategies which insure that the product or products of each stage of the needs assessment are as accurate and valid as possible. Moreover, while it is important the product be an accurate picture of current needs, it is equally important that a majority of those who will actively implement the change effort perceive the end product (identified needs) to be accurate. This point is crucial and often overlooked or underestimated by many educational planners.

Perceived Needs

In a review of over 100 empirical studies of change completed since 1970, Paul (1977, p. 46) was able to generalize that "recognition of school needs and congruence of the change program with needs facilitates change." The studies reviewed showed need recognition to be the first step toward successful change and school improvement. Furthermore, the same studies indicated that the change should address the perceived needs of teachers. Conversely, if teachers do not perceive the need for a change then successful implementation is doubtful. Paul is supported by Rockafellow (1975) who, in commenting on strategy selection for change in local school districts, stresses that for successful change members of the social system affected should recognize the need for change and participate in a needs assessment activity as a means to that end. Similarly, Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) reported research data clearly indicating that change agent success is positively related to the degree to which the innovation (change) is compatable with the felt needs of clients.

For those who participate in the needs assessment to perceive the identified needs as accurate is important because a needs assessment does not exist in a vacuum. It is only a part of the larger change process. This larger process is best observed when needs surfaced in the assessment process are perceived as representing the real situation by a majority who comprise the system to be changed.

To speak of needs assessment as the starting point in planning for change and to stress the need for those actively involved in change to participate in the needs identification process may seem obvious to many; however, Baldridge (Baldridge and Deal, 1975, p. 14) remarked, "To mention the requirement for careful needs assessment seems ridiculous. After all, is not all change preceded by such analysis? Unfortunately, this is not always the case." In fact, innumerable educational change efforts have taken place without a needs assessment or with a needs assessment which did not meet the criteria defined earlier. Often the results have been disastrous.

Perhaps an example may help clarify this point. Take the case of the superintendent who attends an educational convention and observes a K-12 individualized mathematics program being showcased. The presenter reports statistics which indicate that students scored significantly better in mathematics than in the past, student self-concept improved and the teachers learned

new classroom management skills. Returning to his home district, the superintendent distributes awareness information from the project and announces that the district will attempt to adopt the program the following school year.

Granting, for sake of the example, that the program lives up to it's claims and can be replicated with similar results. It is easy to predict that there will be a great deal of resistance from the teachers. The reason is clear. They were not involved in the decision to make the change.

The resistance is likely to be greatest if the majority of the teachers perceive mathematics as an area of strength and the curriculum, in general, to be adequate. Resistance will still be strong if mathematics is perceived as an area of concern, but there is a strong feeling that career education is the top need for the students of the district. Successful adoption and implementation of the program could still be in question even if the teachers perceived mathematics as the area of greatest need and have no real objection to a program of individualized instruction, but have not been involved in identifying the need or in selecting the solution.

Needs Assessment and the Process of Change

Common sense and experience with this type of resistance to change are supported by numerous research findings over many years and in every kind of setting. In their classic study on the communication of innovations, Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) offered a simple, yet quite useful approach to understanding the relationship of needs and needs assessment to the change process. Two factors are involved in this analysis: recognition of need and origin of the new idea (innovation). Each of these factors can originate either internal or external to the system undergoing change, (i.e., the need can be recognized by members of the social system or by someone outside the system and the new idea or practice may originate inside or outside the system undergoing change).

Four types of change as described by Rogers and Shoemaker from the interrelationship of these possibilities.

Imminent change occurs when members of a system identify their own needs and design their own programs or changes to meet their needs. **Selective contact change** occurs when members of a system identify their own needs and adopt a change appropriate to their needs designed outside the system. **Induced imminent change** occurs when sources outside the system identify or impose a need and those internal to the system design the appropriate change. **Directed contact change** occurs when both the need and the change come to the system from outside.

Changes which tend to be effective, easily internalized and require the least amount of supervision result from imminent change. The next most effective source is selective contact change, followed by induced imminent change, with directed contact change or mandated change generally yielding the least productive results overall. Since imminent and selective contact change each include internal need recognition by the system undergoing change, the analysis suggests that needs assessment is an important step in a successful change process.

Strategies

So far a great deal has been written concerning what ought to be done and very little about how to do it. Before offering a description of a simple needs assessment process meeting the above criteria, some discussion of the central strategies or techniques involved is required and necessary.

It has been suggested that all teachers involved in the implementation of educational change need to be involved in the first step of planning for change, that is, the needs assessment. It has also been suggested that it is crucial for the majority of teachers to perceive that the identified needs are accurate. If this is the case, certain techniques or strategies are necessary, within the framework of the needs assessment process, to surface the perceptions of all participants and enable the group as a whole to reach some agreement on the relative importance of these perceptions. In the needs assessment process suggested below, two central strategies are employed—participation and consensus decision making.

In a summary of research data on the adoption of organizational change, Rogers and Shoemaker (1971, p. 3) observed that "Perhaps the most important element in the decision function is the degree to which the adopting unit participates in decision-making." Therefore, needs assessment process design must provide for effective participation throughout the entire process. The term "effective participation" must be stressed, because inappropriate and unplanned participation can be as ruinous to a change effort as effective participation can be helpful or enabling.

There is some ambivalence about participation in the literature, even in Organizational Development literature where participation is almost a byword. Writers in this field observe dangers in "participation" or "participative management," but stress that, "A major route to increased organizational effectiveness is through creating conditions under which organization members can make larger contributions to organizational goals," (French and Bell, 1973, p. 72).

After an extensive review of the literature on participation, White and Rhue (1973) reported some ambiguities in research findings on the value and nature of participation citing conflicting studies and failure to replicate results. They found some research indicating that only workers with higher order needs value participation and that many other workers do not value participation. However, in their own studies White and Rhue found employees had a consistently positive reaction between job attitudes and participation in decision-making.

Black and Mouton (1969) stressed the importance of participation, but warned that it is no panacea in and of itself. While participation can create feelings of ownership and thereby effect involvement and commitment, some kinds of participation can be unhealthy. For example, people can be allowed to participate, but their input is ignored, creating further tensions. Participation can take the form of voting to make decisions by majority rule, often alienating the minority. Participation can also take the form of a win/lose confrontation, resulting in a hostile impasse. Finally, participation which is no more than a pooling of ignorance can be less than helpful in making constructive decisions.

Hall (1969) reported that his study involving 400 corporate managers produced data indicating a positive relationship between the amount of participation and

feelings of satisfaction, responsibility and commitment. In other words, people value and tend to support what they help create.

In discussing the trend toward participatory planning in education, Kaplan (1973) observed that as educational systems evolve from closed to more open-ended organizations, effective processes for participatory planning need to be more thoroughly developed and refined. Kaplan also raised concerns about the process of communication, the nature of group dynamics and the quality and use of the data generated.

In the design of the needs assessment process described below, the participative approach was selected as a technique because of its potential to create ownership, resulting in satisfaction, responsibility and commitment to change. The potential for negative effects from participation, as cited in the literature, was judged to be minimal for the following reasons:

(1) teachers were judged to have "higher order needs," (2) input would not be ignored because by design the needs assessment was to be a first stage in a planned change model, (3) a win/win situation was designed into the process, (4) teachers would be pooling expert opinions and information, and (5) voting was specifically avoided and consensus decision-making was adopted at every appropriate stage in the process.

As a second technique, the use of consensus as a decision-making style was employed to produce group decisions concerning perceived needs that most teachers in the group would actively support and which no one would purposely sabotage. Consensus was operationally defined as the condition in a group in which every member is willing to "go along" with the decision, even though it may not be everyone's first choice.

The Process

The following is a needs assessment process designed to surface teacher perceptions of educational needs. It is based on the criteria and strategies described earlier. It is, therefore, a discrepancy model, based on teacher perceptions, using a participative approach with group decisions reached by consensus. The process is designed to be facilitated by an outside change agent(s) and to require one working day for completion.

The process begins with an introduction to set the agenda and indicate the focus of the needs assessment. The first major activity is a warm-up with the total group of participants. This activity can be one selected to either surface general data in the focus area or a skill building activity on consensus decision-making. The warm-up is followed by a brief lecturette on the discrepancy model which is the framework of the needs assessment process.

When the total group size is over 40, it is split into equal size groups with a facilitator for each group. This completed, participants are asked to work as individuals and begin the construction of a discrepancy model by listing personal perceptions of ideal educational outcomes for their school system. Then triads are formed to allow each participant to share verbally individual perceptions of ideal educational outcomes and to have them clarified and understood by all members.

In the next step participants are again asked to work as individuals on the second phase of the discrepancy model by matching their ideal outcome statements with their perceptions of current educational outcomes. Immediately following this activity, participants are instructed to identify any perceived discrepancies between the ideal outcomes and the current outcomes and translate them into brief need statement. (If the consensus building activity was not used as a warm-up, it should be introduced at this time.)

Small groups (quartets) are now formed and instructed to share their lists of needs and reach consensus on a list of five to seven top needs. On completion of this task, larger groups (of 12) are formed to again share their lists of needs and to reach consensus of a list of eight to 10 top needs. These need statements are clarified, compared and, where possible, combined. The resulting list is then priority-ranked by a process involving the total group. A short debriefing session follows this activity. General comments and feelings are allowed to surface and any necessary clarifications are made.

As a final activity, small groups are formed and instructed to select one of the top 10 needs from the final list. Groups are then asked to indicate their perceptions of major planning steps that will have to be taken in solving the need. This activity is intended to surface preliminary planning data and to identify individual teacher's areas of interest to be used in task force selection for the next phase of the change process. The day is ended with a general debriefing session and an evaluation of the results and the entire process.

This process can be used as part of a comprehensive model involving, parents, patrons and students, however, no data are available on its effectiveness with these groups. It can also be used in isolation when a comprehensive assessment is not undertaken.

A field test of this process with teachers K-12 yielded uniformly high mean scores (7.39 – 8.01 N = 310, on a 9-point scale) on five items designed to determine feelings of personal satisfaction with the amount and degree of participation in the process and feelings of responsibility for need identification, commitment to need solution and quality of needs surfaced. Detailed information on the use of this process is available on request from the Kansas Educational Dissemination Diffusion System, 1847 N. Chautauqua, Wichita, Kansas 67214.

Conclusion

Educators cannot escape the need to change. Change, with its problems and potentialities, is part of our individual and organizational nature. The challenge of change is to confront and solve its problems, to recognize and exploit its potentialities. This can only be accomplished through the application of our knowledge of people—their needs, individual and group behaviors, fears, hopes, abilities—in our efforts to meet the challenge of change. If we set ourselves to this task, we will improve not only the effectiveness of our organizations, but contribute to the growth and maturity of those who constitute them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baldridge, Victor J., and Deal, Terrence E. (eds.) **Managing Change in Educational Organizations: Sociological Perspectives, Strategies and Case Studies.** Berkeley: McCutchan Publ. Corporation, 1975.

Blake, Robert R., and Mouton, Jane S. **Building a Dynamic Corporation Through Grid Organization Development.** Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publ. Co., 1969.

English, F.W., and Kaufman, R.A. "Needs Assessment: A Focus for Curriculum Development." Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervisors and Curriculum Developers, 1975.

French, Wendell L., and Bell, Cecil H., Jr. **Organizational Development: Behavioral Science Interventions for Organizational Improvement.** Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973.

Hall, Jay. **Systems Maintenance: Gatekeeping and the Involvement Process.** Houston: Teleometrics International, 1969.

Kaplan, Bernard A. "Participatory Planning in Educational Decision Making." Paper presented at annual meeting of International Society of Educational Planners and American Association for the Advancement of Science, June, 1973.

Kaufman, Roger A. **Educational System Planning.** Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972.

Paul, Douglas A. "Change Processes at the Elementary, Secondary, and Post-Secondary Levels of Education." In Nicholas Nash and Jack Culbertson (eds.) **Linking Processes in Educational Improvement: Concepts and Applications.** Columbus, Ohio: University Council for Educational Administration, 1977, pp. 7-73.

Rockafellow, Mary Fisk. "Planned Change at the Local School Level: Guidelines for Strategy Selection and Process Assessment." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1975.

Rogers, Everett M., and Shoemaker, Floyd F. **Communication of Innovations: A Cross Cultural Approach,** (2nd ed.). New York: The Free Press, 1971.

White, John and Rhue, Robert. "Effects of Personal Values on the Relationship Between Participation and Job Attitudes," **Administrative Science Quarterly.** 18 (4) (December, 1973), 501-508.

Witkin, Belle Ruth. **An Analysis of Need Assessment Techniques for Educational Planning at State, Intermediate and District Levels.** Haywood, Calif.: Office of the Alameda Superintendent of Schools, 1975.