

*Cause Causit*  
**We Determine Our Fate by the Decisions We Make**

Bev Terry

In most school districts, once a month, school principals leave the daily demands of their school and go to a District Administrators meeting with the Superintendent. They need to meet with other administrators and the district staff as it is often the only opportunity to work with colleagues on common concerns. But when asked to give a song or movie title to metaphorically describe these meetings, principals say: “The Way We Were”, “Dances with Wolves”, “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” or “The Longest Day”, not a positive endorsement of an activity that uses valuable time and resources of a very busy group of people.

In our district, not long ago, our meeting structures were a tangled web of communication overload, miscommunication, and vague decision-making processes. A few members frequently dominated the conversation and others were frustrated by lack of input. Hot topics kept reappearing without resolution. The purpose of meetings and the role of the individuals kept shifting. Sometimes a meeting process worked; sometimes it didn't. We experienced peaks and valleys of effectiveness but wanted more consistency. Meetings were often taken up with “administrivia”. We needed more time for processing ideas and growing together as a team. Our own professional development was a series of “one stop wonders”, but there were topics we wanted to explore as a group and ideas which we knew would help us both individually and collectively. We wanted a meeting structure that was more effective and we wanted to connect individual learning and organizational learning.

**Year One**

Luckily, four of us had an opportunity to attend the Educational Leadership Institutes with Bruce Wellman and Laura Lipton. Following these sessions, we decided to try some of their strategies to make our meeting time more effective and to demonstrate strategies that could be used by principals with their school staff.

At our annual August working session, our Superintendent had arranged for speakers to focus on the supervision of instruction. We used Wellman's strategies of Consensogram and Synectics to help us process the ideas presented. (Wellman, 2004) It quickly became apparent that a Consensogram is much more difficult to construct and use than it first appeared. But the strategy helped us identify and examine our perspectives and to find areas of consent. We did believe that supervision of instruction is important.

In our principal's meetings that fall, we continued with the topic, “Supervision of Instruction” during our professional development session from 3:00 to 4:30 pm. We used a graphic time-use worksheet to identify the barriers for principals in meeting their intentions in supervision work. There were diverse opinions about workloads and priorities but the strategy format gave us a way to positively approach the problem.

In our January working session we introduced a document using professional performance standards for teacher supervision. (Jensen, 2002). We talked about its application to our district

and agreed that it was consistent with what we were trying to do. In subsequent principals' meetings we watched and critiqued videos of teaching using the rubrics and formed small teams to visit classes together and to talk about use of the rubrics. We cross-referenced the document with the contract language in our District. During these months, the professional development section of the agenda grew to fill the whole afternoon of our monthly meetings. It was obvious to all of us that we were involved in meaningful work and that the time was well used.

As we reflected on the year and on the growth of our administrative team, we also realized that the social interaction at our working sessions was an important aspect of how we learned together. In the summer we had a memorable dinner at a winery overlooking Okanogan Lake during a thunder and lightning storm. Since then there has been a kayak trip, more dinners and entertainment, and a large-scale scavenger hunt. Such events create favourable memories of our fellow principals and the bonds thus formed make it easier to pick up the phone to ask for help or advice.

## **Year Two**

Building on our work with the rubric performance standard for teachers, we decided to create something similar for administrators. We gathered responses to the question, "What Do Good Principals Pay Attention To?" These responses generated the categories and we divided into teams to write exemplars for the rubric. The initial categories were: Vision, Instructional Leader, Relationship Building, and Manager. We drafted, field-tested and revised. Over the year we wrote an accepted and manageable Administrator Profile. The process of writing this profile gave us an understanding of our work and solidified our group.

## **Meeting Structure**

Since the first year of focused work on a common issue, we have continued to make changes. The meeting structure for the monthly administrative meeting is now:

- 8:30 – Superintendent's items
- 9:15 – Dialogue
- 10:00 - Break
- 10:30 – Professional development activity/ strategies
- 12:00 -Lunch
- 1:30 – Committee and department reports

Business that concerns a part of the group is dealt with at monthly breakfast meetings for secondary and elementary. Committees deal with specific issues and report back. If whole group input is needed on a contentious issue, it becomes the dialogue topic and is then referred to the people responsible for action. Each part of the meeting has a clearly defined purpose.

## Strategies

We went to the SFU Centre for Dialogue to learn the elements and the use of dialogue and are convinced that such training makes a difference to the way our group functions. We keep a list of “issues” for dialogue. We have learned that all members of our team can have meaningful things to contribute if we dialogue skillfully. We make better decisions when we really know what is involved and understand the points of view.

We purchase copies of books for all principals when they contain references we will be using. Research can inform us, and we need to keep expanding our repertoire of processes. Principals are more likely to use information if it is readily available.

We often work in triads or teams to complete tasks during our pro-d session. Although we focus new effort on a specific issue, we revisit the previous work and build upon it. This approach also helps us to bring new administrators into the group and to keep reflecting on what does work. Strategies are used again and again in order to become part of our common experience and to develop the familiarity necessary for application in other settings. Wellman strategies we have used successfully include: “Here’s What!/ So What?/Now What?”, “Annual Review: Ups and Downs”, “Assumptions Card Stack”, “Windows and Mirrors”, and “First Turn, Last Turn”. (Wellman, 2004)

## Focus and Feedback

The first year we worked on supervision of instruction; the second year, development of our rubric for administrative performance; and in the third year, “Points of Inquiry” in preparation for District Review.

The focus of professional development activity needs to be maintained for a year to complete a significant amount of learning and practice. Without the momentum resulting from the two “retreats” in August and January, we would not have accomplished the tasks we set for ourselves.

We realized that we needed a planning group as well as an historian to keep track of progress and to remind us of our purpose. Of course, the planning team learned the most as we went along, but we did solicit feedback from the rest of the group. Their written responses to our questionnaire called “Taking Stock” follows:

1. Sense of team: the talk time itself has provided valuable professional growth and an opportunity to crew together as a team; previously professional development involved various topics chosen according to perceived needs, now we have a focus for several years
2. Your practice as an educational leader: has promoted more reflective practice which has increased effectiveness as a leader, encouraged us to hone in on strengths and also identify other areas requiring consideration; the network and process of learning has enabled me to have a strong start to being a new principal

3. How you run meetings: more strategies for processing in meetings; certainly have a larger repertoire of approaches; a conscious attempt to shift from information sharing to dealing with educational matters; it has got me thinking; I enjoy the process and have received positive feedback.
4. Your school's decision-making process: shifting away from talking –leader; collaborative – some new twists to take back to school; decisions are usually made following more dialogue than in the past.
5. Your knowledge about educational leadership: increased dramatically; reflective practice has been a by-product of our meetings; increased – a process helps internalize the product; I have learned a great deal. Our work has been challenging and stimulating.
6. People new to the team: it was excellent – the document framework is laid out clearly; “cycling” allows new people to catch up;

### Outcomes and Realizations

We started our process formally and informally and re-evaluated along the way. The strategies helped us work more effectively as a group and helped us reach better understanding of our common beliefs and values. Creating a cycle of learning and practice strengthened our commitment to our work and our development as educational leaders. It has been an ever changing and adaptive work in progress.

We have .....

A sense of moving forward strategically;  
 A sense of raising our level of professional activity;  
 An informed approach to work.

We know....

The change process takes years.  
 An effective working group is invaluable.

And we treasure it.

---

### References

Ashworth, J. and Gill, E. (2004) Dialogue Skills for Leaders. Vancouver: Centre for Dialogue, Simon Fraser University. Phone: 604-291-5179

Jensen, Y., Jones, A., Martyn, D., Unwin, J. (2002) Enhancing Instructional Practice Through Professional Performance Standards, Surrey, B.C.

Wellman, B. and Lipton, L. (2004). Data-Driven Dialogue: A Facilitator's Guide to Collaborative Inquiry. Sherman CT: Mira Via, LLC [www.miravia.com](http://www.miravia.com).