Professional Development The Ad Hoc Way

The Public Management Forum of So. California

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P rofessional development is losing steam. Many local organizations that were created for this purpose have devolved into "eat and greet" groups, acting mainly to boost networking and resumes. A range of programs are offered by consultants, but those programs are costly and, without being reinforced, erode in value over time. Crippled budgets reduce the ability of local governments to buy these services or to pay for employees to attend national or regional workshops. An effective alternative is the ad hoc forum, an informal group dedicated to professional development through group problem solving.

One such group is the Public Management Forum of Southern California. It exists to "create and nourish linkages among civilian and police managers." At no cost to anyone (except for coffee and doughnuts), the Forum gives its members important insights into the police–general government relationship and how that relationship can be improved.

The Forum

The Public Management Forum's membership ranges in rank from senior administrative assistant to department head to local government manager, and from sergeant to captain to chief deputy sheriff. Members are employed by the California cities of Colton, Fontana, Highland, Rialto, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Upland, and the counties of Riverside and San Bernardino. Two members of the Department of Public Administration, California State

University, San Bernardino, round out the membership. No dues are assessed, no permanent officers are elected.

Planned to last two and a half hours each, the three sessions were loosely conducted around a hypothetical problem: A new city council charged its city manager to do something about the local crime problem. The manager, in turn, delegated to his department heads the task of developing a crime reduction strategy. Forum members were asked to assume the role of the department heads. A different set of co-chairs presided at each session (one civilian and one police), their tasks being mainly to summarize the findings of the previous session and identify issues that should be discussed at the next one. The problem-solving sessions were facilitated by the two faculty members.

Guests to one or more sessions were two city managers, a planning director, a school principal, a police lieutenant, a deputy sheriff, and a graduate student. ICMA was represented at the first meeting by Gerry Hoetmer, assistant executive director, and at the second by Allison Hall, assistant city manager of Irvine, California, and a member of the ICMA Advisory Council on Community-Oriented Policing. An average of 20 persons attended each session.

Value of the Forum

The Forum was worth the few hours we invested. We achieved what we set out to do—create and nourish linkages between local police and general government managers. In creating those linkages, we also accomplished the following:

We discovered and explored the "wall of resentment" separating police and general government. Although everyone thought that each side can achieve more with the support of the other, it became evident that reciprocal support is blocked or at least inhibited by mutual resentments. General government managers characterized police as organizationally aloof, resource rich, politically powerful, and personally authoritarian. Real or not, these perceptions block an effective working relationship.

These feelings did not surprise the police managers. In fact, more than one officer volunteered examples supporting the perceptions. What did surprise the police was the extent and depth of the resentments. All agreed that local police departments must do a better job at cultivating relationships with their civilian counterparts. Nevertheless, the police also felt that general government managers do not appreciate the complexity and difficulties of police work. Nor can they be aware of the unrealistic expectations that are placed on police by the public and elected officials.

Although the resentments were deep, the discussions were civil and always aimed more at understanding and seeking solutions to the resentments than it was at assessing blame. We cut a few holes in the wall.

We learned about community-oriented policing (COPS). COPS was the strategy chosen by the hypothetical department heads to reduce crime. This presented a problem for the Forum, since our background in COPS ranged from extensive (two members advised ICMA on developing its COPS training program) to no experience. We had to talk substance before moving to process. Once we did this, we actually moved beyond COPS, developing in the process the rudiments of a model for community-linked problem solving in local government. As to the wall of resentment, we also concluded that COPS can be effective to the extent that the police–general government relationship operates on the basis of mutual

professional respect, rather than distrust and resentment.

We affected public policy. Three police members of the Forum have pivotal roles in developing and implementing community-linked policing strategies within their respective jurisdictions (Fontana, Highland, and Rialto). As a result of the Forum, they decided independently to strengthen the relationships between themselves and their civilian counterparts. Another member—this one from public works—chairs her city's advisory committee on community policing.

Note what happened. While learning about COPS we concluded that an effective program needs the willing support of local government employees outside the police department. But we also learned that achieving this support is contingent upon dismantling the wall of resentment. We never reached a consensus about how that might be accomplished, but we made progress in the limited time we were allotted. Moreover, we feel particularly gratified that most members came to perceive crime as a community problem, not just a problem for the police, and that a partnership model of organizing the community's resources is the best way to reduce crime.

We redefined networking. Networking too often consists of gathering with like-minded people for the purpose of job enhancement with the hopes of personal enrichment. There is nothing wrong with that, as far as it goes. The problem is that networking does not go very far. Planners network with planners, engineers with engineers, and police with police. What should have been obvious to us, but was not, is the value of moving beyond the parochial view of our own professions and departments and engaging a more diverse set of people in discussions of mutual interest. The in-

sights gained will help us grow as local government professionals.

We refined our bargaining skills. Let us not ignore the obvious: No opportunity should be lost to simulate bureaucratic conflict and attempt to resolve that conflict through bargaining. The point of our exercise was not to prevail, but to reach consensus. This required open discussion, and skillful negotiations. We never achieved consensus, but we got a lot of practice in our attempt.

Lessons about Creating and Operating Ad Hoc Forums

The Forum was and remains a positive experience for us. This is due primarily to the quality and commitment of the members. We think that our success also can be traced to certain things we did right in organizing and operating each sesssion. Two things stand out:

Membership diversity. A police officer commented after the first session that he had spent most of his adult life socializing with members of his own profession. He regrets that choice, for it limited his professional growth. This officer now believes that public sector professionals ought to seek diversity.

Membership diversity is important for two reasons. First, diversity increases the probability that cherished but flawed professional assumptions and values will be challenged. This is critical if we and our professions are to grow rather than stagnate. Second, diversity promotes our understanding of and sensitivity to the assumptions and values guiding other professionals. If we are to progress up the local government hierarchy, then it is better to move beyond our own worldview at an early point in our careers. (Note to the unwary: the police officers made clear that they consider themselves potential local government managers.)

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In spite of the value of diversity, we ended up limiting our own mixture of members. Fearing the intimidating effect they might have on the other members, we purposely excluded elected officials. That might have been a mistake, since by so restricting ourselves we also excluded a view that must be considered by public sector managers. Also, without design, we did not include private sector or neighborhood representatives, nor did we recruit representatives from recreation, planning, education, and community development. Our discussions would have been richer had we invited persons from any one or all of those groups. We could not accommodate every group—nor can you—but experience taught us to be a bit more imaginative in the future.

Problem-solving format. Tennis players improve their serve by serving, mechanics learn to replace transmissions by replacing them (nobody actually repairs automobiles anymore),

architects learn to create by creating. Public managers do not learn to lead by listening to someone talk at them for 20 minutes.

Being talked at is an overvalued learning device. It has its uses, but those uses are not matched by the extent to which all of us rely on it as a learning technique. We recommend problem solving as a more powerful learning method because it more closely simulates reality. Like tennis players perfecting their serves, public managers can perfect their problem-solving skills best by solving problems.

Creating an Ad Hoc Forum

The three conditions necessary for starting a forum are an entrepreneur or small group of entrepreneurs, a problem that arouses interest across a range of professions, and a core group moved by a shared interest in solving that problem. Assuming that the first condition is met whenever a person or small group decides to start a forum, the other two can be met by following these steps:

1. Define a broadly interesting problem. Your problem might be implementing total quality management (TQM) in a local government. Or you might persuade one or more city or county managers to define a problem with the understanding that you will report your findings to them at the end of the final session.
2. Recruit people who share your interest. This group does not have to be large; anywhere from 10 to 20 individuals would seem to be about the right size. If your government is large, then you might want to confine your forum to employees of that government. Alternatively, you might enlist personnel from several local governments. Do not exclude the private or nonprofit sectors. The point is to achieve vertical (power) and

horizontal (functional) diversity in your membership.

3. Send copied materials to your members before the first meeting. The materials can consist of a hypothetical case study (as we did), an article describing a real case, an article on the topic (e.g., TQM), or a problem defined by city or county managers. You might structure the first session by listing specific questions to be answered; but do not confine yourself unduly. We departed from our agenda once we reached the issue of police–general government relations. We were right to do that.

4. Arrange for a mutually convenient time and place to meet. We met on a second Saturday morning of three consecutive months. Conference rooms in three different locations did nicely for us. We also limited the number of meetings in advance, which seemed to reassure members that they were not committing themselves to an endless stream of meetings. It is easy to begin a new series of sessions, or add sessions after the final one. However, it is quite discouraging to run out of things to say halfway through your program and then have to cancel one or more future sessions.

5. Solve your problem. We recommend that you appoint one or more members as facilitator—you might use a new one each session. Our use of a facilitator allowed us to move through the issues with relatively little discord and without devoting unwarranted attention to any single topic.

6. Dissolve the organization, unless a consensus exists to continue the forum at some later date.

It seems easy, and it is. Development programs like this ultimately improve public service, at no cost. For information about the Public Management Forum, contact Brian Watts, Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration, California State University, San Bernardino, San Bernardino, California 92407, 714/880-5752. ▣

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