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FOSTERING PARTICIPATION

The importance of participation in community practice is self-evident. There remains, however, the vital question of how to get people to attend, join up, speak out, work on a committee, or lend support.

A school social worker faced this kind of practical problem:

The mothers' program began in October and ultimately involved nine mothers—seven tutoring and two helping with the materials center. In April, the teacher in charge of the program sought my assistance. Two mothers had recently dropped out of the program, and only three mothers were attending their general meetings.

CONCLUSIONS OF RESEARCH

Findings of recent research on participation can be summarized in this generalization:

The amount of voluntary participation in an organization depends on the benefits gained from participation, and the degree to which the benefits are shown to result directly from participation.

THE ACTION GUIDELINE

The concept of benefit provision suggests the following Action Guideline:

To foster participation in organizations, programs, or task groups, practitioners should provide or increase relevant benefits.

From Jack Rothman, John L. Erlich and Joseph G. Teresa "Fostering Participation," pp. 7-25. Reprinted by permission of the authors.

The term "participation" in the guideline should be interpreted in a broad sense. The term is meant to include not only the recruitment of new members, but also changes in the patterns of existing members' participation. For example, an individual who had merely attended an activity might shoulder responsibilities or become an officer.

Many professionals intuitively use benefits as a tool in their work, and the guideline may seem an obvious statement. However, we are trying to make this common approach more explicit and more systematic so that it may have a greater impact on participation in programs and services. Though derived from an independent literature source, the guideline is related to certain learning theory or behavior modification concepts, as we will discuss shortly.

TYPES OF BENEFITS

Benefits may be described as either *instrumental* or *expressive*. Instrumental benefits provide material, tangible, task-oriented returns, such as getting an increased welfare allotment or new equipment for the agency. Expressive benefits are intangible and psychological in character, such as increased friendships, personal satisfaction, or pride. Further distinctions may be made within the two categories.

- (1) *Instrumental benefits* may be:
 - (a) *material*—obtaining a loan or grant, securing needed information or authorization, etc.

(b) *Anticipatory*—setting up an action structure, or obtaining a verbal commitment as a partial achievement toward the material gain.

(2) *Expressive benefits* may be:

(a) *interpersonal*—making new friends, having an enjoyable social experience, etc.

(b) *symbolic*—receiving an award which represents public approval or recognition of an individual's participatory activities, being mentioned in a newspaper article, etc.

In practice, these approaches are often used in combination; sometimes one is given special emphasis and supplemented by others.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF BENEFITS FROM PRACTICE

Here are descriptions of how professionals used the four different types of relevant benefits with different groups:

(1) Instrumental Benefits: Material

Our community mental health program in the housing project was floundering. I had been working with a few residents in the project to develop a self-help group. When our efforts faltered, I decided to use the guideline with the goal of increasing participation in group meetings.

We elected to increase benefits by resolving specific problems for each family; for example, getting free roach spray from the manager (he usually charged residents), getting a toilet repaired, obtaining special educational attention for certain children, and transporting families to the dentist. At the same time we saw the families individually and informally, and decreased the number of group meetings from weekly to bi-weekly to "on call." In a sense, elimination of unnecessary meetings was another reward. On a group level, when tenants ran into rent disagreements with the management, we set up contacts with Legal Aid.

Eventually we called the group together, and then personally visited those who did not come suggesting that we could not con-

tinue to help them unless they attended the group sessions! It worked. By providing concrete benefits and by making them depend upon participation, the group began to function again.

(2) Instrumental Benefits: Anticipatory

I used this guideline to help organize the Black Student Union at the junior high school. The kids had come to me for help because of my role as program director at the local community center.

We called a meeting in which the students identified the areas for union concern, and set up appropriate committees supervised by my staff. The organization devised plans for a Black History Week. This effort enabled the student union to develop a program with a large number of black students participating.

This satisfying action structure achieved, the group proceeded to establish broader goals and I was able to withdraw my staff.

(3) Expressive Benefits: Interpersonal

By employing the guideline, I was able to increase participation in our district-wide organization of secondary students. Meeting with their steering committee, I suggested that the group might enjoy a weekend "retreat." When the school agreed to cover part of the expenses, I proceeded to plan the excursion. The event was a definite success: the students interacted socially and looked forward to meeting one another again.

The eventual effect was that our regular attendance nearly doubled, and previously inactive members became more vital participants.

(4) Expressive Benefits: Symbolic

As a school-community agent, I desired to increase community participation in the school and to improve services to children through volunteer help. Special classes were decided upon according to the interests of the students and volunteers. These included: arts and crafts, cooking, crochet, dramatics, modern dance, and sewing.

The participation guideline gave continuity to the program. I provided recognition for the volunteers by working toward a pre-

sentation of activity "products" at the end of the program, offering service awards, and providing publicity. I requested that a regular PTO meeting be rescheduled for the final presentation, in order to reach a large number of community people. The program met with great success: the volunteers and students both wanted to repeat it for another six-week session.

THE PATTERN OF IMPLEMENTATION

We have found that one general pattern was followed in all the cases in our field tests. This pattern consists of five steps:

1. goal determination
2. selection of benefits to be used
3. initial contact with potential participants
4. follow-up contact with potential participants
5. delivery of benefits, or operation of the event

We will consider each of these steps in turn.

(1) Goal Determination

The first step is to select the goal of participation. In our experience, the guideline was used to form new groups or to maintain or increase participation in existing groups. Here are illustrations of these objectives, as stated by participants in the field study:

My goal is to increase the number of participants in the Mental Health Association's annual chapter leadership workshop.

My goal is to get the Welfare Rights Organization groups in the area to participate in securing an Early Preventive Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment program for their local communities.

My goal is to maintain the current level of participation in the mothers' tutoring program in the school, and to increase the number who attend the group meetings.

(2) Selection of Relevant Benefits

The selection of relevant benefits for increasing participation is apparently a two-stage process. First, the practitioner must identify the benefits available; second, the benefits must be matched to the target population. (If the practitioner has access to ample resources, it may be possible to reverse the order of these steps.)

In our experience, the majority of the practitioners who used the participation guideline provided multiple benefits. Most chose a combination of instrumental and expressive benefits, frequently combining material and interpersonal rewards.

(3) Initial Contact with Potential Participants

The method used for the initial contact varied according to the nature of the target system. The major difference in approach lay in the ease with which the potential membership could be identified and located, and in the degree to which the practitioner was in day-to-day contact with that membership. The types of initial contacts varied, ranging from direct personal conversations and telephone discussions, to flyers, mailing, and notices in the newspapers.

(4) Follow-up Contact with Potential Participants

Practitioners in our study tended to use a different medium for the recontact than was used for the initial contact. When the potential membership was individually identifiable, the contact and follow-up were usually by formal letter or memo in alternation with an informal conversation, either face to face or by telephone. When the potential membership was diffusive or broadly

defined, practitioners tended to use a different form of mass media for the recontact stage than they had used for the initial contact. The value of newspapers, radio, or television in supplementing handbills and posters should be considered. Note that a variation in the follow-up medium is not a necessity; it is simply a common practice.

(5) Delivery of Benefits

The actual delivery of the promised benefits is particularly important. When the benefits are in the form of a social event, the practitioner should oversee the proper operation of the event.

Several professionals in our study developed contingency plans, so that if one benefit turned out to be unavailable, another could be substituted. If the benefits were interpersonal, the worker had to expend more energy during an event. Other types of benefits, particularly material, required greater effort prior to an event. Generally speaking, the less control workers had over the delivery of the rewards, the more active the workers were, often using multiple and contingency approaches.

IDEAS FROM BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

Readers may have recognized this reward (or reinforcement) principle as an element of behavior modification. Although behaviorist concepts have not been generally directed to systems intervention, a few ideas and terms are relevant to community and organizational work. While the concepts may be familiar to some readers, their application to social systems will be new. We believe that these behaviorist ideas can be used without any coercion to foster voluntary participation.

Behavior Specification

It is essential that the user specify the exact nature of the behavior to be changed. In the case of participation, we may be attempting to increase:

1. *rate*: the frequency with which an individual attends meetings, programs, etc.
2. *form*: the type or quality of participation, that is, attendance, committee chairmanship, making financial or other material contributions, speaking up at meetings, etc.
3. *duration*: the extent of participation over a period of time
4. *variability*: the stability or regularity of participation

The assumption is that different types of benefits may be effective in encouraging different aspects of participation behavior.

Positive Reinforcement

This refers to benefits contingent upon the performance of some desired behavior. The clinician or caseworker has certain direct reinforcers available in relationships with clients. These include approval, attention, and affection. In a group or community context, these rewards may be offered to one individual through other individuals. . . . In human service community work the agency's resources offer varied reinforcement possibilities, as do those external community resources with which the agency has operating ties. The trick is to locate these, recognize their reward potentials and make them available.

Contracting

There has been increasing use of this concept in settings such as schools and community mental health programs. A prac-

itioner might come to an agreement about a level of participation, which, if followed for a designated time, could result in a desired outcome. For example, contracting was used in the issuance of a certificate to leaders who completed the six-week volunteer service session in the school-community example cited earlier.

Shaping

This involves a series of sequential goals leading up to a long-range objective. In an organizational context, one might speak of "interim goals." As a hypothetical example, a community worker wants a woman to take on an appointive office; the worker starts by asking her to attend a committee, then later asks her to chair a committee, and finally to hold an office.

Group Contingencies

Benefits may be offered to groups as well as to individuals. The United Fund offers a great number of social and symbolic rewards to volunteers who achieve their goals, often using graphs and charts to dramatize the group objective. A committee or organization might set certain goals or standards for participation, and foster group satisfactions for successful attainment.

PROBLEMS OF EXECUTING THE GUIDELINE STRATEGY

Our field staff encountered some difficulties implementing the guideline, and they made a variety of suggestions.

First of all, they pointed out that the benefits selected must have real significance for the target group. One worker stated:

I had to be sure that the benefits were really viewed as worthy by the group members. Without this, the whole thing would have failed.

Another noted that:

The benefits must be perceived as important by participants. The benefits could be potential as well as actual.

The need for interim, short-range benefits to sustain motivation was also stressed.

I often feel that a long-range goal is achievable but a group may not be able to keep that goal in sight—or even to agree with it at that stage of the game.

Because of existing power relationships in society, low-income persons lack the clout to make rapid gains or to resolve their pressing problems. This means that their participation must be sustained while they struggle with those problems. The structuring of participation to provide expressive experiences and immediate social gratification permits this. Those of us who are highly issue oriented tend to forget or neglect that. We dare not!

Many workers highlighted the difficulties of choosing appropriate benefits.

Since instrumental or expressive rewards vary by individual and by situation, the determination of rewards was a problem. Also, it was not within my power to assure delivery of all the benefits which might have reinforced participation.

Guaranteeing the benefits was the most difficult aspect of this approach.

I think that a practitioner who promises only expressive benefits, without any instrumental rewards, is fighting an uphill battle.

GETTING STARTED

(1) Think of some existing . . . problem in your agency situation that could be aided through increased or improved participation (by clients, other agencies, staff members, etc.). . . .

(2) Specify the nature of participation behavior that you will be dealing with in

your intervention and the direction in which you would like to change it. For example, will you be dealing with:

- recruitment
- retention or maintenance
- increasing the rate of participation
- changing the form of participation (attendance, membership, committee participation, volunteer work, officer-ship, contributions)
- stabilizing or varying the pattern of participation

(3) Try to select relevant benefits which are both attractive to target groups and available for you to deliver.

What types of benefits would be effective in stimulating the desired participation? Consider:

Instrumental:
material
anticipatory

Expressive:
interpersonal
symbolic

Consider multiple rewards. Get to know your group. Observe them; ask them about their likes; ask other experienced professionals.

What types of benefits are available to you? Consider such sources as:

- your personal relations
- agency resources and good will (the board, volunteers)
- agency links with external resources
- the group itself

(4) Decide whether some special reinforcement technique may be applied, such as:

- shaping
- contracting
- group contingency

Don't let these get in your way, however. Use them only if they are applicable and potentially useful in your situation.

(5) Consider ways of making benefits known and available to the relevant target group.

(6) Carry out the guideline. Don't forget follow-up contact.

(7) Try to assess the results of your work. Specify real indicators of change in participation. These may include such factors as:

- change in specific number of persons at meetings
- changes in number and/or percentage of dropouts from programs
- increase or decrease in the number of individuals who collaborate by taking responsibility

PRACTICAL ADVICE DERIVED FROM THE FIELD STUDY

The personal resources of the practitioner are his most effective tools. These include: selecting appropriate benefits, announcing them, motivating people, and delivering both interpersonal and material rewards.

It is advisable to choose a goal and a strategy that are consistent with (or which can be enhanced by) your experience and position in the agency. Choose a goal about which you have conviction and enthusiasm.

With regard to your agency situation, seek a goal that will fit in with your other assignments, and attempt to gain whatever support you can from fellow staff members and agency administrators. Try to locate suitable physical facilities, or plan a program that fits the available facilities.

Choose a program that will be of specific interest to clients, or work hard at developing their interests. It helps if you choose a group of clients who are receptive to your agency and the program; attempt to build this kind of receptivity as you proceed.

Try to clarify your personal goals and assignments in the agency, so that you are free to concentrate on this task without heavy pressure from other demands or without the neglect of other assignments. Lack of staff and resources may impede you; selection of a feasible objective is an important strategic consideration.

Several field workers warned that the intervention cannot be carried out in a mechanical, ritualistic manner. The art of practice has to shape the science of any intervention strategy. This involves the practitioner's attitudes, interpersonal skills, sense of timing, etc. As two of them advised us:

There is a need to develop trust and a decent relationship with client groups. This takes time and demonstrated proof that you can deliver.

There is the consideration of the personal qualities of members, as well as the level of enthusiasm conveyed by the practitioners.

More specific observations were offered:

I found little difficulty in using this guideline. The only problem was self-imposed: a

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Irving A. Spergel

ORGANIZING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY: THE SOCIAL-STABILITY APPROACH

The community worker engages in both organizing and interorganizing activities.

From Irving A. Spergel, *Community Problem Solving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 128-42. © by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. Published 1969. Reprinted with permission of the author and the publisher.

limited time in which to develop the offered benefits.

One difficulty was my lack of information about the community I was working in. Insufficient time forced me to form a group before I had adequate community information.

Do not burden the staff or clientele by trying to solve the problem in one day.

The phone conversations proved to be crucial to the success of this guideline. Through these personal contacts, we were able to respond to the needs and concerns of those to whom we spoke.

I ran into the usual organizational interferences. Too many complicated chains of communication hindered the application of a simple idea.

Realize also that clients and community people will have other activities that compete for their time and interests. The benefits you offer must be strong enough to gain their attention and capture their motivation. Clients and residents may lack knowledge of the organization or may not possess certain skills for adequate participation. You may need to make up these deficits as you continue. . . .

The geographical scope and functional complexity of the organization, as well as its strategic commitment, determine which method he emphasizes. Thus, the worker with a neighborhood organization is concerned primarily with organizing; the worker with a metropolitan welfare council, with interorganizing.