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# Consulting with Peers-An Exchange for Mutual Renewal

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## Consulting with Peers—An Exchange for Mutual Renewal

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROJECTS ARE DEMANDING TO ADMINISTER AND COORDINATE, WHETHER FOR INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS OR OVERALL PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS. Students are engaged with the perspectives of the community as well as those of the classroom teachers and other students. The responsibility of the learning shifts to the student and is more student centered: the community site becomes the classroom, the student becomes her own instructor, and the community resources become the textbooks. While such projects highly motivate students, developing and implementing them requires an ongoing commitment to change.

BY MARILYNN CUNNINGHAM

As a change agent, it is a challenge to keep an adequate flow of personal energy to facilitate service-learning as an instructional strategy and at the same time withstand the scrutiny of the school personnel's traditional viewpoint. So who motivates the change agent to keep on keeping on?

After 12 years in such a situation, motivating myself, I needed personal renewal. I needed assistance from adult peers who knew what I was going through. I needed to renew the energy, enthusiasm, and creative thinking I took to my service-learning programs. I began to look outside my institution for a group of people with whom I had more in common. Otherwise, I was in threat of burn out. I discovered a process called "peer consulting," where two professionals engaged in service-learning work together so that the consulting process benefits them both. I was fortunate to participate in a structured peer consulting program, but you can use peer consulting in an informal way as well.

When I began to participate in this program, my first question was, "What is a

peer consultant?" I knew of peer coaching, peer mentoring, and peer tutoring, but I had never heard of peer consulting. I learned that the two words describe the process pretty well: peers work together, with one in a consultant capacity. Many fields including education utilize consultants to help solve problems of all sorts. And many fields including education draw on various peer programs, where people of the same age, job status, or some other equal footing relate, usually with one peer teaching the other.

What is different about peer consulting, I have found, is that the peers remain in a position of equality, even though one is a consultant to the other. What makes this possible is the philosophical commitment of both parties to the service-learning process. The consultant goes into a situation to serve the peer as well as to learn more about her own life and work. The peer seeking the consultancy is serving by inviting a colleague into her everyday world, and in turn, learning from the consultant's reflections. There is a transfer of energy in both directions. With the equal status understood, the process

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tends to renew both people, generating new energy, ideas, and excitement for the "peer" as well as the "consultant."

**GETTING CONNECTED** When trying to be an agent of change within a traditional field such as education, there is a danger of getting isolated. I found peer consulting through my efforts at networking with others in experiential education, initially through NSEE. It supplied cutting-edge information to support my base of awareness. I could read NSEE's journal and know that I was not alone. Then I attended an NSEE national conference and discovered a network of people who offered an identification different from anything else I had ever encountered. Conversation, meaningful conversation, filled every nook and cranny of the conference site. The sessions included not only a base of knowledge on experiential learning, but also how this information could be applied.

The conference was exhilarating. We talked about concepts like the importance not only of *what you know* but what you *do* with what you know, including the impact of knowledge and service on the common good. The learning was multi-perspective, multi-dimensional, and multi-leveled. It charged my internal battery with enough energy to last a year. To help me sustain my personal struggle as a proponent for service-learning in the traditional instructional arena, support was just a telephone call away.

For several years, I attended the NSEE national conference as a part of my annual professional growth plan, which led to a strong relationship with a small group of other secondary educators who made the same commitment. We wanted more secondary school educators involved, so NSEE sought and received funding for this purpose from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The grant provided for peer consulting. I was selected to participate in the program and learned the peer consultant model developed under this grant. Under our program, a broker agency, in this case NSEE, served as a middle man, linking a service-learning peer with a consultant. A middle man is not necessary but may be helpful in some cases.

Peer consulting reflects the service-learning concept. This is an opportunity for two or more people to gather together for the purpose of bringing about change in an existing situation. It offers an opportunity for a give-and-take relationship between two people who hold similar or equal positions in two separate organizations. This give-and-take relationship becomes dynamic when the depth of the engagement captures the essence of service-learning. Both the peer and the consultant learn through serving each other. To solidify the contract, the consultant is offered monetary income or gain from the broker or the professional organization receiving the service, and the peer is offered psychic income or gain from the consultant's outside view or expertise.

**HOW PEER CONSULTING WORKS** The process begins when the peer contacts a broker or a potential consultant to discuss the need for an outside opinion or expertise to help move an organization along. A broker agency can help determine the best match for the peer from a pool of consultants. After the purpose for the consultation is determined, the peer takes the leadership in the relationship by providing information to the consultant. This reflects good planning, whether a broker is involved or not. This provides the consultant with background materials so that the

consultant can begin an analysis and synthesis. During this process, the two plan a visit. The visit offers the consultant an opportunity to observe and collect information, meet others at the site, and become involved with different viewpoints than the peer.

The peer is accountable to the institution and grounded within the organization seeking assistance. The peer is connected to everyday, practical realities, which are necessary for activities to be conducted in an efficient and effective manner. The consultant is not grounded within that organization and hence can be open to whatever she can visualize. While the peer presents the realities, the consultant observes with a mind for possibilities. Their interaction creates the process of peer consulting and by its very nature promotes change. Problems have a chance to be observed as opportunities.

Through the exchange of information on both an informal and formal level, the two develop a plan of action. It usually takes the form of a written recommendation to the peer and can be copied to the key stakeholders within the peer's organization. The recommendations can transform questions about "what is happening" to ideas of "what can be" and "how can we get there." The consultant returns to her workplace ready for her own challenging realities with a renewed frame of mind and spirit.

Peer consulting reflects good practices within the service-learning field. Both the peer and the consultant gain through the acts of giving, serving, and learning. Their relationship offers an opportunity for the inside view and the outside view to come together for the purpose of establishing stronger connections. The peer and the consultant have separate but equal roles. The success of peer consulting rests within their ability to relate. It is in the relationship that personal renewal evolves for the consultant and the peer. For that reason, I connect the basic concepts of my peer consulting experiences to the letters in the word RELATE, using it as an acronym for Real, Equal, Learn, Alert, Think, and Energize.

These six elements of the peer consulting process are guideposts for all models, whether a broker is involved or not. As true partnerships between schools and community agencies expand in the service-learning field, where agencies do more education and schools do more service, the peer consulting model, with service-learning as the underpinning philosophy, can help educators as well as professionals in other fields.

**Real.** The more I can experience the reality of a culture and climate of a school system, the more I can be of service. The most successful visits are when the processes and procedures represent the everyday exchange among people. When the visit is staged, my observations do not have the opportunity to be authentic. The more I am included in each event, the more I can gain trust and thus add credibility for my peer. In Massachusetts, my peer involved me in the set-up of rooms, organization of materials, errands at the central office, lunch with the teacher's union representative, and parts of teachers' work lives. In all, I consulted at this site four times.

My most memorable experience happened on my third visit. Contrary to our planning, the school was not in session. Students on their own time came to school to share their stories with me.

For a treat, they were offered lunch—their choice. I was honored to be invited. In my black suit and high heels, we ate chicken dinners set on the hood of a car. There, we had an open discussion of the promises and challenges of service-learning within their school. When a visit allows me to listen to the stories of students, parents, and teachers, I have the opportunity to gain trust, become involved, offer perspective, and be of service. When my view is real, my ideas are relevant. Then, I can serve my peer in a more practical way. The “how to” makes sense.

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**Equal.** Both the peer and the consultant have much in common. We exchange our shared information and experiences from a common perspective, and it forms a bond or bridge over which we can extend our helping hands. This bond is built on common levels of status and privilege within our respective organizations, as well as our shared value systems. We both agree and understand the strength of the learning gained through the act of serving the needs of others. We concur on the need to preserve service-learning within the organization as a credible instructional strategy. I enjoy staying in the home of my peer when I conduct a visitation. This offers more time to reflect and build a relationship around our commonalities. I can ask questions about my observations and check out to what extent my perspective is in touch with reality.

**Learn.** New learning promotes creativity and new levels of awareness. For this reason, on a visit, I leave my organization and past behind and become open to the experiences and realities of my peer. I connect to this new awareness much like an artist connects to her art. I unite myself with my peer's organization as if it were my work. I plan, produce, and see my peer's work as if it were my own. This unity creates a transformational learning. Immersed like this, I experience, reflect, and connect to create new learning or new awareness based on prior knowledge or experience. While returning home, I take time to separate from the visitation. The follow-up reports and letters offer the formal opportunity to reflect and document the new learning.

**Alert.** While consulting, I assume the ability to respond to my peer within the context of her organization. I find it important to be mentally responsive through multiple ways. I am alert to the written word. Before a visitation, I read data and descriptions of the culture and climate of the organization and the community within which it exists. I listen to the perspective of my peer. When I visit, I am engaged. However, I am outside my experience and observing all the time with a keen eye. In this alert state, I make notes that serve as a reality check before recommending action.

During a peer consultation in Kentucky, two peers and I met in advance to plan my visit. Rather than travel to six different schools, we decided to have one representative team from each school come to the volunteer center for a training. Using their Learn and Serve grant applications as a planning tool, our goal was to lead the group through the planning steps, one at a time. I began the session with the theory behind experiential learning, connecting it to service-learning and the steps on the forms. When the teams started on the first step, they became engaged. The room was buzzing with activity. I became alert to the fact that they were moving ahead to the next steps. Immediately, I adapted my format. Rather than continue ahead with the planned agenda, I circulated about the room and offered consultation as requested. They were an empowered group. Each small group moved at its own pace and with its own energy. I simply facilitated.

**Think.** The process of analysis and synthesis is important. I find it essential in my report to communicate the analysis with the big ideas divided into manageable parts. After breaking down the large concepts and experiences into pieces, they can be put together into a unique vision. This serves as a recommendation. When pulling the essential parts together, it is important to recognize the simplest ideas first, then build a connection to the most complex ideas. This moves the awareness to another level in a careful and thoughtful way. The report can serve as a tool for organizational growth and change.

A peer consultation in Ohio last summer illustrates how a report can help promote organizational change. The school system, under my peer's influence, had included in its five-year plan for all ninth graders to have a service-learning opportunity. She arranged for me to meet with the key stakeholders to discuss the implementation of this strategy. Unfortunately, her direct supervisor, who oversees curriculum and instruction, was unable to attend. This underscored the importance of a careful analysis in a follow-up report written to my peer and copied to her colleagues. I organized the report around four concepts: Define the school system's vision for service-learning, describe your expertise with service-learning, describe the best fit of your expertise and the school system's strategic plan, and finally, recommend steps for you and your director to begin. This offered a simple, but uncompromising format for my peer and her director to use as a point of reference.

**Energize.** Management of energy is essential. Through all the RELATE processes of peer consulting, the Reality of the situation, the Equal foundation, the Learning focus, the Alert posture, and the Thoughtful follow-up, Energy is imparted with a lighthearted attitude. Negative experiences can be recycled into positive ones. Instead of being upset, angry, or disappointed, offer encouragement and hope. Even in the most real situations, as a person experiencing what my peer experiences, I see with an eye that notices opportunities instead of problems. Change in the middle can sometimes look like failure, and offering a different perspective can be a stabilizing force. Such attitudes form personal and professional renewal. In Ohio, my peer and I shared roles in the discussion with the key stakeholders. I facilitated and moved the conversation along. Although I was aware of some inconsistencies in perceptions, I was not concerned. I wanted everyone's opinion on the table. Throughout the hour of discussion, consensus was evident and I was able to repeat what I heard. When the assistant superintendent suggested I write down the group's consensus, I called on my peer's energy. For she, as the observer, remembered the details. Likewise, she needed my perspective for the consensus. Our exchange offered synergy. We were two, gathered together, to serve, learn, and renew.

*Marilynn Cunningham is the Professional Development Specialist with the Fayette County Public Schools in Lexington, Kentucky. Previously, she was the district's Communications Coordinator of the Experience Based Career Education Program. Marilyn has been a Mentor in NSEE's Leadership Development Program and a Consultant with NSEE's National Initiative, funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.*