

Negotiating an O.D. Agreement – A Case of Ethics and Values

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The Case

Roy Green and Joan Rosenbloom, two external OD consultants with considerable experience in working with school administrators, have been contacted by Mark Shultz, the superintendent of a Supplementary Educational Services (SES) district, to discuss a possible OD engagement. At their first meeting, Shultz provides the two consultants with the following background information. SES districts carry out a variety of functions that local school systems often cannot perform effectively. These functions include conducting surveys and research to establish program needs, teaching special education classes, providing instructional films, and coordinating educational television in local schools.

Superintendent Shultz’s SES district was established in the early 1960s to serve a rural population extending over a large geographical area with a relatively small number of school-age children. The first superintendent of the district served continuously until 1983 and had a staff of eight administrators, most of whom were hired in the early days of the district. Seven of them are still on the job. The SES district kept its largely rural character until the early 1970s, when a newly completed major highway network began to bring people from the nearby metropolitan area into

the region. By 1980 the SES district included a substantial number of school districts that were distinctly suburban in character. Shultz, who had previously served as superintendent of a member school district, took office in 1984, one year after the former superintendent retired. At that time two new program administrators were added to the staff.

Shultz believes that in order to meet the changing needs of the district his administrative staff will require substantial in-service work, including clear delineation of goals for the district and the organization of staff activities. Shultz also expects the staff’s work in the future to require a more cooperative approach to decision making. He therefore wants Green and Rosenbloom to work with the staff on goals clarification and team decision making. The two consultants agree to do so in principle, but first they want to interview all staff members and then meet with Shultz and the staff together for a joint decision about whether to proceed.

Green and Rosenbloom interview and observe the staff over a three-week period. On the basis of their interviews and observations, they both conclude that the SES district has a number of problems. Before contacting the superintendent again, however, the

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consultants discuss between themselves two related issues. First, how should they present their data and conclusions at the meeting with Shultz and the staff? Second, what should they suggest as a proposal if a consensus emerges from the meeting that the SES district should enter into an agreement for OD activity with Green and Rosenbloom? Both issues raise serious problems.

Green and Rosenbloom agree that, on the basis of their interviews and observations, the staff members seem quite uncertain about their collective goals. Both consultants observe that each staff member tends to concentrate narrowly on tasks within his or her domain of responsibility and show little concern about how these tasks fit into a broader context. On the one hand, it appears to Green and Rosenbloom that the staff could benefit from focusing on goals clarification and team decision making. On the other hand, the two consultants realize that they came away for the interviews and observations with a sense of unease about the staff's willingness to work on such activities.

One of the newly appointed staff members, Jerry Gordon, discussed at length the relationship between Superintendent Shultz and the SES district Board of Education, a subject that Shultz had not even raised in his meeting with Green and Rosenbloom. According to Gordon, upon assuming office, Shultz took a number of steps designed to encourage greater board participation in the affairs of the district. However, these steps had resulted, said Gordon, in a situation in which on several occasions the board had sought to control program management. Gordon reported that at one point the board had sought to oust him but Shultz had refused to accede to its wishes.

Gordon's openness in talking to Green and Rosenbloom differed sharply from

the way other staff members responded when they were interviewed. Looking back on those interviews, the consultants agree that, for the most part, it had been difficult to draw out staff members to talk about various aspects of their work and especially about their attitudes towards Superintendent Shultz. Although neither Green nor Rosenbloom can point to anything beyond subjective impressions, each considers it distinctly possible that relations between the staff and Shultz are beset by serious problems. The consultants, however, have no sense about the specific nature of these problems – for example, whether they relate to Shultz's leadership style, to conflicting agendas between him and the staff, to assorted festering grievances, or to fundamental differences over educational philosophy.

Green and Rosenbloom thus face difficulties about the appropriate stance to take in negotiating an agreement with the SES district. They concur with Superintendent Shultz's assessment that the staff needs help on goals clarification and team decision making. To serve that purpose Green and Rosenbloom could propose a series of workshops that they have conducted on many previous occasions. Their agreement with the SES district could be quite clear-cut, with little room for misunderstanding on either side. Green and Rosenbloom both feel, however, that the workshops might simply treat superficial symptoms of deeper problems for which far more extensive work would be appropriate.

The direct course, in view of the way the two consultants feel, would be to raise the deeper problems at their meeting with Shultz and the staff, and then propose more extensive work for dealing with them. On the basis of the impressions they have gathered over the past three weeks, however, it seems to

Green and Rosenbloom that neither Shultz nor the staff are even ready to acknowledge the problems, let alone work to resolve them. Under these circumstances, they agree, the direct course would almost certainly fail. In their view, Shultz or the staff probably will not go along with the proposals for extensive work and, even if they both do, it will not be the kind of deep-seated support that meets a proposal that responds to a client's felt needs.

Green and Rosenbloom briefly consider not raising the deeper problems at all and proposing only the workshops on goals clarification and team decision making in the hope that, once under way, they can help Shultz and the staff move toward dealing with the deeper problems. They reject this approach, however, as essentially dishonest. It seems to them that OD professionals should not proceed with a hidden agenda. Green and Rosenbloom also consider suggesting a contract that calls for the series of workshops, but with a proviso that would allow for the possibility of a more extensive effort. They find, however, that they cannot phrase the desired proviso in a way that avoids the difficulties they would face if they directly proposed a major program. Green and Rosenbloom then discuss simply declining to enter into a contract with the SES district in view of the apparent attitude of Shultz and staff. They are reluctant, however, to abandon the possibility of providing assistance. The SES district clearly needs help, and it seems to them that as OD professionals they should examine the situation long and hard before deciding that their efforts would not make a valuable difference.

The night before the meeting with Shultz and the staff, the two consultants still have not decided what to do.

Comments by Bernard J. Mohr

I experience many ethics and values issues as two-horned dilemmas, neither side of which is a particularly comfortable place to be sitting. However, in the exploration of such less-than-comfortable positions, the greatest amount of personal learning and self-development and, I might add, a certain amount of anguish, takes place. So while I occasionally envy those of my colleagues who have been able to reach a point in their personal and professional lives where issues of ethics and values fall clearly and cleanly into place and action are taken unequivocally, for myself, the resolutions of these issues, as difficult a process as it is for me, leads me to articulate more clearly my philosophy of practice as a professional in this field. My only two wishes are that the process of resolving ethical and value issues would be less energy-consuming and that, with the benefit of hindsight – that is, more data – I will more and more frequently say yes, that was the best decision for *all* concerned.

With this as a preface, the reader might easily conclude that he or she is reading the thoughts of someone who is wishy-washy at best or, worse, simply incapable of translating his beliefs and values into daily practice. In my own defense, I would counter that I do indeed hold strong values related to organization consultation work and consider myself an ethical person. So why do I have difficulty determining what action to take in the face of ethics/values issues? For me, the answer has to do not so much with the problem of moving from a philosophical stance into practice per se (although that, too, can be problematic) but more with determining what to do when one set of values squarely bumps up against another set of values, when one ethical position seems to contradict another ethical position. This is the situation, I

believe, that faces our two external OD consultants, Green and Rosenbloom. Herein I attempt to identify the values and ethics that appear to be “bumping up against each other”.

Green and Rosenbloom are considering three alternative courses of action, and for each we are told of a presenting dilemma. Let us review each alternative, its presenting dilemma, and the values and ethics context within which it lies.

Alternative Course of Action 1

Propose a series of workshops aimed at responding to the client’s presenting problem with the hope that the other issues will surface and an opportunity to work on them will be created.

The presenting dilemma here is that such an intervention might well treat the symptoms rather than the deeper problems, unless, of course, the workshops facilitated a deeper understanding and energy level to work on those problems – in which case the consultants might be guilty of working with a hidden agenda. On the other hand, if the workshops do not address the deeper issues, are our consultants violating a prohibition against short-term, quick-fix solutions that do not lead to longer-term system health? Furthermore, if they move ahead in any direction without informing the client of their concerns, are they operating in a collaborative and open mode as espoused in our field of consultation? Truly our consultants are caught in a situation in which values and ethics seem to be bumping up against each other. In this, as in each of the proposed alternatives, there is no easy solution. However, it may be useful to determine what underlying assumptions or hidden dynamics are contributing to this dilemma.

As experienced consultants, and with access to wider system information that is possessed by any individual member of this system, Green and Rosenbloom need an alternative perspective on their problem of “now that we have this ‘new’ information about the system, what do we do with it?” In this not unfamiliar situation, my own response is to ask myself a few basic questions as a way of trying to generate a new perspective and thereby move off the horns of this dilemma. Specifically, I would ask myself, “What data do I really have?” What personal desires to be seen as “incisive” and as “the expert diagnostician” are driving me, and how do they conflict with my data? The question here revolves around my ability to separate my own needs (and I would be foolish to deny their existence) from the needs of the client system. My belief that this may be an issue in this case rests on my own experience that unclear group goals and ineffective team functioning are hardly ever cause only by simple information lacunae or minor skill deficiencies. More frequently these behaviors are symptomatic of deeper issues of the sort that have been sensed by Green and Rosenbloom. If this can be accepted as an operating assumption, then I would ask myself, “Why am I surprised to this “new” data, and why is it that my contracting process appears to have left our provision for the possible reporting of such data?” This would raise the further question, Have our two consultants been working with an agenda hidden from the client and themselves from the start by not confronting these issues at the stage of initial contracting? These questions then lead me back to asking again, “Where do the data stop and where do my own needs and projections take over?”

Since, like our consultants, I would want to respond to the expressed need of the client, Shultz, and avoid working with a

hidden agenda, I would strive to let my actions be guided by the principle of “helpful, informed choice” (Argyris, 1970). It is my belief that OD consultants are obligated to provide their client systems with information about available options, resources available to the system in applying these options, resources available to the system in applying these options, and, very importantly, a process for the client system to analyze and act on this information. Control of the depth of an intervention should always be a matter of informed choice, and it should always be a decision made in partnership between the client and consultant. In this case, the consultants are talking as if they have full responsibility for these decisions. While this may be the case in a therapeutic situation, an OD consultation presupposes a more collaborative stance (based on the presumption of basic organizational health). Therefore, I think Green and Rosenbloom are responsible for creating a forum, a process that allows informed choice to take place between both parties in such a way that neither party feels backed into a corner.

Alternative Course of Action 2.

Raise the possibility of deeper problems with Shultz and his staff and propose a more extensive intervention to deal with the situation.

The presenting dilemma here is that if they take an open, “share all the data” approach, they may violate an implicit contract they have with Shultz to work on only the issues of goal clarity and team decision making. (Of course, we do not specifically know whether their contract with Shultz allows for the investigation and feeding back of data relating to issues between Shultz and his team, but we can make the inference that it does not since Green and Rosenbloom are having so much trouble with this alternative.)

Additionally, if they take this alternative, are they pushing the client system further than it is ready to proceed at this point, since the majority of Shultz’s subordinates, and Shultz himself, have expressed no particular desire to deal with these deeper-level issues? Naturally, if they avoid sharing their data, they find themselves back in the predicament posed by alternative 1.

Again, the development of an alternative perspective as a function of some self-directed questions may lead Green and Rosenbloom out of their quandary – or it may not. The questions I would ask myself in this situation, in addition to those asked in the previous alternative, include: Who is the client and does it make a difference what actions I take? If I see the client as being the total system or “the relationships” between system members (a la Warner Burke), do I have a different point of view than if I see only Shultz as the client? And if I see only Shultz as the client, what are my obligations to him versus my obligations to the rest of the system? Is there a need to collect more data to confirm or disconfirm the impressionistic data held by Green and Rosenbloom, and, if so, what is the appropriate contract for the collection and feeding back of such data?

My own bias in this case is to fall back once more on the admonition of Argyris (1970), that the role of the OD consultant is to provide valid data to the system, within a process that supports free choice, and in such a way that system energy is mobilized to deal constructively with the data. If this is an acceptable position, my responsibility becomes one of expertly designing a process and mechanism that meet not just one but all three of Argyris’ criteria. This is not an easy task to accomplish, but it will at least provide a framework for further action.

Alternative Course of Action 3.

Propose a series of workshops with a provision that would allow for the possibility of a more extensive effort.

This alternative presents many of the same dilemmas as those attached to the previous options. Additionally, it raises the possibility that such an intervention, although intended to respond to the client's presenting problem, may indeed be doomed from the outset if the underlying dynamics (in which the presenting problems are situated) are not dealt with from the beginning. On the other hand, this may be a case of a system needing to experience some small successes with the consulting team before it is ready to undertake a larger, more significant commitment.

In addition to addressing the previously mentioned questions, I would want to ask myself to try and resolve this dilemma: Can a process be designed in which "helpful informed choice" takes place at the same time some constructive work is done to move the situation forward even if the client decides to go no further? And who is to judge "real worth" and who is to make this decision – myself, the client, or some other combinations?

A Final Nonalternative.

Each of the foregoing alternatives has some viability, whereas the alternative to simply disengaging from the client system is not, in my opinion, a viable alternative.

It is not a viable alternative because an intervention has already begun (the data collection); and even though this was done under the guise of an exploratory review, the reality is that the system has already been changed by even this limited external contact. To disengage completely at this point would, I

believe, violate our values regarding collaborative decision making, our values regarding our obligation to feed back data we collect, and our value of being helpful.

It would also be an action whose premise is the naive notion that a client system is not "ready" unless the level of energy to move ahead is shared equally throughout the system and there is widespread agreement on the problems from the outset. In fact, I believe that the role of the consultant is sometimes to work on these very issues of "unreadiness" by helping the system make an informed and free choice about its future.

The field of OD has many good values, which in turn suggest what is or is not ethical behavior. Unfortunately, when values "go bump in the night," thorny issues of what constitutes ethical practice are raised. I have tried to show how some of the value dilemmas might be approached (I hesitate to use the word "resolved" because that makes it sound too simple) and correspondingly how some of the ethical issues would be impacted. I consider the discourse around such case studies as these essential to a heightened sense of clarity about ethics and values issues, and I welcome comments on what is written here.

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