

THREATS TO THE BELEAGUERED ADMINISTRATOR: LOVE, MISSION, AND CAMARADERIE

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An attempt to reduce stress, headaches, and sleepless nights among students and staff in a university service-learning program, led to governance via the nine best practices described in this narrative. Using appreciative inquiry as the theoretical framework, current and former staff members were asked to tell stories of times when the service-learning program functioned at its best. Excerpts from the stories indicated that a number of the best practices helped set the stage for peak moments in the organization's history.

Introduction

In January 2002, I became director of Common Ground, Long Island University's service-learning program at its Brooklyn campus in New York City. This was my first opportunity to direct a program on my own; however, I had several years of experience as an administrator, social worker, academic advisor, and assistant director in working groups of all shapes and sizes, pursuing different missions. To varying degrees, I had been a beleaguered administrator and had observed the variables in the work environment that seemed to increase stress and feelings of being overwhelmed, and others that seemed to alleviate them. I sought to draw from these experiences and introduce program norms designed to reduce administrative fatigue as much as possible. As I approach my fourth anniversary as director of Common Ground, it is a good time to take stock and evaluate the impact of these interventions, and to share solutions and ideas with beleaguered colleagues.

Like many service-learning programs across the country, Common Ground links

classroom learning with real-world experience. It takes the traditional idea of volunteering and weaves it to the curriculum of an academic course. For example, students in a graduate history class on the Holocaust are offered the opportunity to volunteer at Self Help Community Services' Brooklyn Holocaust survivor program. These students, who are learning about the Holocaust at the university from books, lectures, films, and library research, work directly with Holocaust survivors at Self-Help. Thus, academic content comes to life with real dialogue as survivors form relationships with students and ultimately share their stories.

Another successful partnership exists in the political science department. Students in an introductory course on power and politics learn the structure of city government and criminal justice administration. These students volunteer at the New York City Department of Probation. Here, they work with probation officers in the courtroom and interact directly with probationers. Another partnership has formed in the art department, where students in an elementary school art education course

prepare and conduct workshops for children whose parents are incarcerated. These art workshops take place at the Osborne Association, an organization that offers services for people in prison, those formerly incarcerated, and their families.

When service-learning works well, it is a diamond with several facets. Students learn the academic curriculum in more depth and remember it for years to come after linking it with real-world experiences. Students also gain work experience, an intrinsic sense of satisfaction, and a resume that looks great to future employers. Classroom instructors enhance the learning environment as students link the curriculum to real-world experiences in class discussion. The community agency is pleased to have college student volunteers. The clients of these agencies benefit from the energy and good will of college students. The service-learning program receives a sense of satisfaction from making helpful linkages, and the university contributes meaningfully to the surrounding community. Finally, students indicate on our end-of-semester questionnaire an improvement in attitude toward community involvement, an increased sense of social responsibility, and an improved understanding of social and cultural differences (Kuwahara et al., 2005). These shifts in attitude hold promise for ongoing community involvement over a lifetime. Thus, students, instructors, future employers, community agencies, clients, the service-learning program, the university, and the larger social world all profit. The challenge lies in coordinating, promoting, monitoring, evaluating, and maintaining the program to maximize its effectiveness—while at the same time avoiding becoming beleaguered in the process.

The task we faced was formidable. The Brooklyn Campus has over 11,000 students, all of whom are potential participants in Common Ground. The campus offers hundreds of courses per semester; again, any of these could incorporate a service-learning

component. In addition, we needed a way to establish relationships with a range of organizations so varied that they would offer something of interest to students in health science, business, education, the arts, social sciences, and humanities experiences that would directly relate to their courses and career aspirations.

Keeping track of our community partners, courses, and participants represented an administrative task involving a blizzard of paperwork. Maintaining the accuracy of information on our community agencies, numbering as high as 60 at any given time, presented an ongoing challenge. We found early on that an ambivalent or shy student is discouraged by a wrong number or incorrectly listed agency contact. Recognizing and rewarding our student participants was another essential objective, as was rewarding our community partners. Recruiting students and faculty, and winning them over to the merits of service-learning represented a marketing, outreach, and sales component. Recruiting new agencies was another necessity, as was responding to frequent agency inquiries in a timely manner. Individual counseling sessions would also be necessary to help students explore their interests and examine the transition in role identity that comes from taking that first hesitant step into the world of work.

Finally, we needed to examine the results of our efforts from three perspectives: those of student, faculty, and community participants, and share this information with the larger university community. We needed help for this project in its entirety—financial support, staffing, and guidance. In summary, the opportunities to become overwhelmed, multi-tasked, stressed-out, over-extended—in a word, beleaguered—were endless.

Previous headaches and sleepless nights had taught me three things. First, working with a team offers several benefits beyond sharing work and dividing labor. The sense of

community and fellowship possible in a good working group has the potential to restore the energy expended by working hard toward a shared goal. I searched for sources from which to create a small staff, and eventually created one of graduate assistants, social work interns, and work-study students. Each year as students graduate or progress in their studies, staff members are replaced.

Second, an egalitarian model is a worthy goal. A working group in which power is shared, and decision-making is consensus-driven, reduces the feelings of alienation and subjugation often found in steep hierarchies. Group process also offers the benefit of considering multiple solutions to problems if all staff members are invited to brainstorm and contribute ideas. Third, open and frequent communication is key. Sub-grouping, secrets, and misinformation all serve to divide working groups against themselves and frustrate the task of working toward a shared goal.

In response to the beleaguering stress and strain, and enlightening success and reciprocity of previous work experiences, we developed the following "best practices" from which to govern the administration of Common Ground. These best practices are summarized below.

Best Practices

- **Egalitarianism.** At weekly staff meetings, responsibility for chairing and facilitating the meeting rotates. Decisions are made by group consensus.

- **Empowerment.** Staff members are encouraged to take a task and run with it. They are given the dignity of the responsibility for doing their work. We are guided by Booker T. Washington's adage, "Few things can help an individual more than to place responsibility on him, and to let him know that you trust him."

- **Weekly staff meetings.** Without fail, weekly staff meetings are held. Each semester we determine the hour of the meeting based

on a time when all staff members can be present. We have chosen evening hours when this is the only opportunity for us all to be together at once. This presents an inconvenience at times, but the benefits in terms of open communication are worth it.

- **Support.** We have been given consistent support from the university since our inception.

- **School work priority.** Since most staff members are students, it is emphasized that their studies take priority over Common Ground activities. Paradoxically, this seems to increase participation and follow through on work assignments.

- **Hiring policy.** Staff members are hired based on their ability to be responsible and reliable.

- **Recognize all stakeholders.** Staff members are acknowledged for their contributions each week at staff meetings. Program participants are given a "celebrate your achievement" party at the end of the semester. Community agencies are thanked by inviting them to a panel discussion on a compelling topic in social welfare which we organize each semester.

- **Evaluate outcomes and share the results.** Each semester we evaluate participants, faculty, and community agencies via questionnaire. Their responses are analyzed and presented in the program's annual report.

- **Seek outside guidance.** Common Ground is governed primarily by an advisory board made up of faculty and community partners. Advisory board meetings take place annually where our work is presented and advice is sought.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the administration of Common Ground from a theoretical perspective, we employed the lens of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Appreciative inquiry

explores what gives life, vitality, meaning, and purpose to an organization; it examines the peak moments of a department's functioning. This approach helps to highlight the creativity, joy, and passion that often lie buried under layers of routine administrative work. An analysis of peak moments helps provide information on their causes and preconditions, which can be used to stimulate their occurrence.

When applying the lens of appreciative inquiry to the realities of the beleaguered administrator, it appears that contemporary organizations are trapped in a problem-solving paradigm. One finds that most administrators see their role essentially as one of "problem solver." They spend time at their agencies primarily focused on problems—breakdowns and failures of the past—in an effort to understand the causes of sub-optimal functioning. The proponents of appreciative inquiry argue that focusing primarily on problems produces a mechanistic mentality in which the organization is approached as a problem to be solved rather than as a mystery to be embraced. This creates a downward spiral of motivation. How excited can one be by a role that promotes an obsessive focus on problems?

In addition to focusing primarily on problems, the administrator is also beleaguered by a Western administrative paradigm that views resources in exclusively economic or technical terms (Parameshwar, 2004). This leaves us with a chronic sense of scarcity; there are a multitude of worthy programs competing for funds, personnel, and technology, engendering scarcity. Appreciative inquiry enables the beleaguered administrator to appreciate the multidimensionality of resources and to recognize that abundance can come from spiritual and psychic resources that can be deliberately leveraged toward administrative ends.

Appreciative inquiry suggests the beleaguered administrator transcend the

problem-orientation and scarcity perspectives, and focus instead on moments of functioning when productivity, teamwork, and resilience are at their best. In this exploration of Common Ground, we examine the peak moments of our work together as a way of understanding what has been working well and igniting our imagination of new possibilities for the future.

Our Approach

Using appreciative inquiry as an organizing model, recently during our regular staff meeting the staff members of Common Ground were asked to tell stories about their peak moments with the program. The objective was to explore staff members' high points as administrators of the Common Ground Service-Learning Program and what they thought caused them. We sought connections between the staff's perceptions and the best practices employed. Which of our best practices were really useful? We then invited current and previous staff members to co-author this article with us. To capture their perspectives, we asked them to write down their responses to the following questions:

1. What do you most value about yourself (a) as a person and (b) a staff member of Common Ground?
2. What do you like most about working here?
3. Tell about a time when you felt most passionate and excited about working here—a time when the boundary between work and play blurred.
4. Tell about a time when you have seen Common Ground at its best.
5. For questions #3 and #4, please explain what you think made those moments possible.
6. What, in your opinion, gives life and vitality to Common Ground?

A total of eight staff members—four current and four former—agreed to join us in this joint effort.

What Staff Members Said

A number of themes emerged from the written remembrances of peak moments with the program. These themes included a shared mission; staff camaraderie; the satisfaction of working with student participants; staff performance; new skills acquisition; and appreciation of staff and student diversity. Each theme is discussed below.

Shared Mission

Each staff member stressed the importance of the overall task of Common Ground, that is, linking students to the community through service-learning. Staff members derived satisfaction from this shared goal and identified it as one of the things they liked most about their work. Several staff members emphasized the ways in which students may benefit:

Service learning is an extremely important aspect to enhance students' learning. I think that all students should be required to volunteer and give a little of their time to those less fortunate.... Common Ground provides a vital element to enhancing the quality of a students' educational experience in more ways than they could have possibly imagined.

—Nicole Kuwahara

I felt very passionate about the program throughout my tenure with it. It was very stimulating to work with individuals engaged in experiential learning. I was particularly invigorated at the beginning of the semester witnessing the excitement,

curiosity and anxiety surrounding the program. I was thrilled to be able to help connect students with various community agencies to explore their interests.

—Maurice Gattis

Other staff members emphasized the program's benefits to the community:

As a staff member of Common Ground, I feel that helping people to help others is rewarding on two levels: to give students the experience of broadening their own horizons and the opportunity to feel great about themselves, and also in providing help to needy individuals throughout the city.

—Dana Gruber

My individual contribution to a venture that assists other people in impacting their community through service learning, and working with a team of people with the same goal, is an incredible opportunity.

—Marcia Ellington

Other staff members emphasized a sense of shared commitment to the program's mission:

Common Ground ... is comprised of good quality staff members that are able to contribute to the group while sharing the same goals and aspirations.

—Viet Dang

There are three elements that are vital to the success of Common Ground. Selfless individuals in the community doing good work, staff

with their hearts and minds fixed on the mission of the program, but mostly the students who are inevitably changed by their experiences.

—Joseph Chiechi

Staff Camaraderie

Each staff member commented on the sense of community and camaraderie experienced among the staff. For some, this was a favorite aspect of working for Common Ground, for others, staff cohesiveness was identified as the reason for the success of the program.

A number described how community and teamwork were generated:

As individuals, everyone who works at Common Ground brings a little something different to the table, but as a group, we gel perfectly. It is this sense of camaraderie and the diversity of our individual experiences that I love about our group.

—Dana Gruber

Our weekly meetings are the foundation of our group. It is a time where we can talk to one another, catch up on new events, keep track of our progress, and ask for advice or suggestions. It is the best time to discuss our success and problems. We are able to discuss our ideas or opinions and to move on as a team.

—Viet Dang

Some identified the egalitarian model as a reason for the group's camaraderie, and others noted the tolerance and respect they felt when voicing their opinions:

I enjoyed the egalitarian and collegial atmosphere. ...most decisions were made by the staff collectively. I was really impressed that we had a different chairperson for each staff meeting.

—Maurice Gattis

...Our staff meetings exemplified Common Ground at its best. Each staff member was given equal importance, rotating the chair of the meeting each week. Each agenda item was given thoughtful consideration. No person or idea was treated with less than the utmost respect, and the students and their experiences and well being were always given top priority.

—Joseph Chiechi

Common Ground is an extraordinary place to work.... The group comprises of the best staff members. They encourage me to be myself and voice my beliefs. The work environment facilitates discussion, communication, and collaboration. Common Ground promotes members to voice their opinion, to communicate freely.

—Viet Dang

Their stories told of staff interactions infused with warmth and humor. Staff members noted the sense of friendship or family they felt toward their colleagues, while others noted the playfulness evident in staff meetings.

I have seen Common Ground at its best when staff meetings take place on Monday nights where the staff not only talk about how to help the students more, but also are

all good friends and really work well together.

—Grace Lee

Staff meetings were times when I forgot that we were co-workers, and felt the camaraderie of friends. With such humor, intelligence, open communication and respect circling the table, we as a team developed ideas easily, organized quickly, followed through with plans and evaluated events and programs efficiently. To see ideas become reality... was very exciting.

—Laura Segundo

It was always invigorating to attend weekly staff meetings—to have an opportunity to be surrounded by others who shared not only a common vision of the program's mission, but to be spending moments with people who were your family away from home. We accomplished the tasks set forth, but were also able to laugh, joke, be inspired, cry, commiserate, and be able to be ourselves with the feeling that we were understood.

—Nicole Kuwahara

Demarcations between work and play have always been distinct; however, one moment of crossing over between the two surfaced in one of our weekly staff meetings. On this particular occasion a 'playful' competition evolved from who makes the most creative agendas. During this moment, the staff was relaxed and leisurely about the agenda for a while, but soon returned to the serious business of getting things done.

—Marcia Ellington

One staff member made note of the annual change in personnel, caused by graduation or academic advancement. However, she suggested that staff members who continue into the subsequent year carry forward the group's norms.

The frequency of the turnover rate is high, however this is due to the fact that a majority of the staff is made up of students. Therefore, year to year there is always someone new in the organization. However, the positive personality, charm, and kind nature of the staff who do remain allow newcomers to feel a part of a family.

—Nicole Kuwahara

Satisfaction of Working with Program Participants

A favorite part of the job for many staff members was the satisfaction of helping program participants and seeing them succeed:

[Students] give uniformly positive feedback about their volunteer experiences and clearly feel good about the work they do. Knowing that we've done our part in enriching the lives of others by opening their eyes is Common Ground at our very best!

—Dana Gruber

I valued the interaction with Common Ground students who were interested in making an investment of time in the community by volunteering, and in themselves by immersing into new opportunities.

—Maurice Gattis

We had the wonderful opportunity to help students tap into their interests, apply college learning to service to the community, and help in some cases to open a person's eyes to the real New York City.

—Joseph Chiechi

Talking about the program and my own experiences in volunteerism and service-learning, encouraging students to participate, supporting them throughout the process, seeing them mature as the result of their important work, and rewarding them in the end was awesome.

—Joseph Chiechi

Staff Performance

Many staff members reported that the program excelled during special events, such as the biannual “celebrate your achievement” party and the panel discussions. However, a surprising number felt the program was at its best at the level of its more everyday, mundane moments and daily interactions.

We operate at our best most times. We are a very busy group of people with many other things going on in our lives, but despite this, we all put a lot of work and care into Common Ground and do a job which I think is great.

—Dana Gruber

I cannot pick an individual moment in which Common Ground appeared better than other times. I suppose it would be better to say that we were a great team, working our “best” all the time from something as simple as filing

to more complex as celebrating each other's personal victories.

—Laura Segundo

It's difficult to pinpoint when exactly Common Ground has been its very best, because I think the collaboration of each and every moment has contributed to the successes of the staff and the program.

—Nicole Kuwahara

Each individual tends to focus on his or her area of expertise and then collaborate with other members to accomplish a common goal. These events represent Common Ground at its best moment. Without teamwork, nothing can be accomplished. A good program such as Common Ground is based primarily on the members of the group to build foundation, stability, and quality.

—Viet Dang

New Skills Acquisition

Two staff members indicated what they liked most about working for Common Ground was the chance to learn and practice new skills.

The act of helping each person that we encounter and the ability to learn relevant people skills, passed on from staff to staff, makes working at Common Ground a very rewarding experience.

—Marcia Ellington

Projects are team based and therefore utilize communication skills, teamwork, and organization skills. Being part of Common Ground helps build these essential

skills that are the foundation to work effectively with anyone. These factors are needed on the job, in school, or in any type of organization or group that requires human interaction. Common Ground is a great place to gain the experience of coordinating meetings, developing discussion panels, and creating different presentations.

—Viet Dang

Diversity

Only one staff member noted that cultural diversity gives life and vitality to the program, but the diversity of our staff and of the students we serve is so rich it warrants comment here. Staff members are Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Jamaican, African-American, Peruvian, Haitian, Jewish, and Italian. The students we serve are equally diverse. One indication of Common Ground participant diversity is the array of religious affiliations participants indicate on our end-of-semester questionnaire. In Spring 2005, students indicated they are Jews, Catholics, Christians, Greek Orthodox, Pentecostals, Jews for Jesus, Seventh Day Adventists, Muslims, Hindus, and Mormons (Kuwahara et al., 2005).

Common Ground lives and breathes diversity; that is its most recognized quality. Students and staff of varying dispositions and descents are involved in this effort.

—Marcia Ellington

Discussion

While Common Ground enjoys the unique privileges of receiving ongoing support from higher administration and lack of strict mandates and pressures, the results of our conversation with current and previous staff members indicate that the program runs well

in part because of the best practices employed. Specifically, weekly staff meetings, the egalitarian model, a shared sense of mission, new skills acquisition, diversity, mutual engagement in a meaningful, altruistic task, and the sense of community were all themes indicated by the staff to be at the heart of the program. These themes promote human interactions that reduce stress, burnout, misunderstandings, subjugation, and unfairness that undermine many working groups and beleaguer many administrators. In accordance with appreciative inquiry, this conversation demonstrates that non-concrete, non-technical, and non-economic resources, such as motivation, enthusiasm, sense of community, passion, and love can be cultivated and nurtured, and yield meaningful and satisfying results that create energy and reduce the usual beleaguering stresses we find in administration.

We found that our best practices enhanced the sense of *gemeinschaft* and reduced the sense of *gesellschaft* so commonly engendered by modern administrative bureaucracies. Introduced by the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1957), *gemeinschaft*, or “group feeling,” refers to a departmental culture and a configuration of relationships epitomized by a nurturing family climate. *Gemeinschaft* is a sense of primary group in which relationships are direct, face-to-face, and intimate; where members experience camaraderie and a sense of unconditional regard. *Gesellschaft*, or “company feeling,” on the other hand, is exemplified by a spirit of bureaucratic impersonality. Interactions are seldom face-to-face, and relationships are mediated by contractual obligations; acceptance is conditional. As the responses to our questions indicated, a sense of *gemeinschaft* appeared to permeate how our members experienced the culture of the department.

When we asked our staff about times when they were most passionate and excited

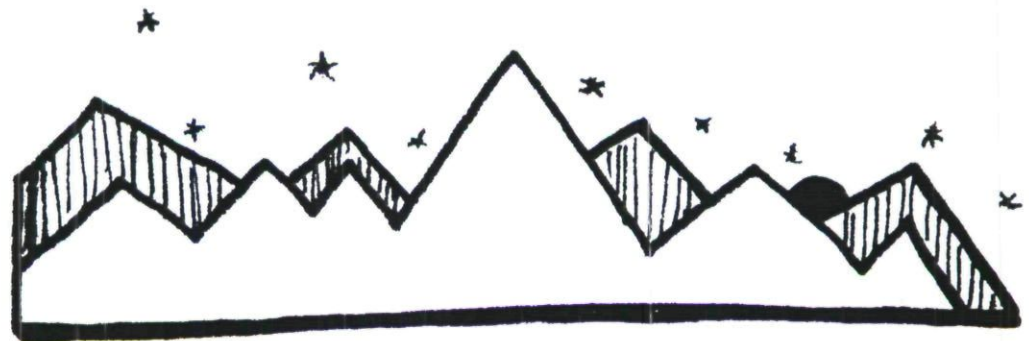
about their work, we tapped into a variety of stories that awakened in the members a sense of motivation. If there is one lesson we learned, it was that peak moments of engagement, brought alive through storytelling, are an important part of outcomes assessment and can help a group to achieve significant program outcomes.

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