Working with Cross-Professional Teams in Educational and Other Settings

Dr. Todd Gravois led groups in a wide ranging discussion on the costs and benefits of cross-professional teams in schools, universities and health care settings. Early in the session, he proposed defining how "team" and "group" are distinguished from one another in order to enhance understanding of this terribly under researched area.

- Individuals are members of a *group* when they are working together on a common focus or function; they are defined by their professional role and not by their membership in the group; no one person can make decisions for or speak for the group.
- Individuals are members of a team working toward a shared common purpose or goals when they hold themselves mutually accountable to other members; and individual members have permission by the team to speak for the others.

Teams, groups or individuals can provide services to individuals, to other professionals who serve individuals (e.g. teachers, other psychologists), or to systems. They may target primary or secondary prevention or tertiary intervention.

Teamwork: When and Why?

Several participants from academic settings indicated that sometimes it was more efficient to work alone rather than in teams in order to meet a goal, yet sometimes there is implied pressure to work collaboratively. Sometimes you have to sacrifice efficiency in order to engage a wider set of stakeholders in a project. Others in academic settings indicated that they would like to work collaboratively in teams but the reward system made that difficult. The point of the resulting discussion was for members of the group to clarify what factors they considered when deciding on the form of a new project (conducted individually, in a group, or as a team). Finally, several participants in the session implied that faculty who serve as mentors or role models in health care training need to demonstrate to their students and interns how they work in teams, because of the importance that teams will play in the future of health care.

Training Goals for Teamwork

Although everyone agrees that term "teamwork" conveys collaboration, current workplace environments vary with regard to how highly collaboration is rewarded. According to remarks made by participants, healthcare environments have moved much more deliberately toward collaborative efforts designed to improve patient outcomes. Psychologists whose main function is research and teaching in schools of liberal arts, however, are more likely to live in a world where individual accomplishment and productivity is recognized more than service to colleagues, the institution, or even to students. In this light, participants discussed whether it was appropriate to assume that the world that future professionals would enter would be collaboration based and to stress these skills accordingly. Would it be fair in some cases to prepare professionals for a desired rather than a real working environment? Does the decision, in fact, depend on what kind of environment current students expect to practice?

Optimal Developmental Periods for Learning to Work Collaboratively

Every topic that enters into professional training curriculum can take up time from some other topic. The group agreed that the topic of inter-professional teaming was important to introduce at each stage in the career of a psychologist, from graduate school, to novice professional, through continuing education. Dr. Gravois highlighted that from his experience, while learning about teamwork is good to do all along the continuum, actively working in teams is best left to those who have a strong professional identity in place. He argued:

> "Newly developing professionals must have a professional identity strong enough to represent their discipline, and at the same time be flexible enough that they will not resist collaborative practice. Further, according to Schon (1983) the capacity of professionals to practice in multi-professional environments depends primarily upon their ability to understand and respect cognitive patterns --in other words to understand the way in which others conceptualize problems and interventions as well as the values of every profession."

When Possible, Turning Obstacles to Teamwork into Advantages

Finally, in addition to the factors mentioned above, the participants discussed various other stumbling blocks to the success of collaborative teamwork. These included perceived and actual status differences among the professionals involved, and irreconcilable values held either by individuals or by professions participating in the team. The status differential question is one that may simply result from tradition, or more likely from funding inequalities, or which profession is held most accountable for negative outcomes (i.e. physicians in medical settings). Explicitly recognizing status differences and the sources of those differences may help to tamp down resentments, and facing the difficult task of addressing seemingly irreconcilable differences in values may allow the team to come up with solutions that successfully co-opt arguments against a proposed plan.

Clearly, working in teams and training in consultation skills are important to learn about and practice throughout the preparation and professional development of psychologists, not only because of growing opportunities for collaborative work, but also because of opportunities that psychologists may have in helping to facilitate teamwork that harnesses their expertise in human interaction, decision making, and performance.

Schön, D. (1983) The reflective practitioner. New York: Basic Books