

## Stage Two: Problem Identification

Picture this scene. Skip, an attractive sixth grader, is sitting at his desk. From his desk the teacher, Mr. Bernard, has just announced that it is time for history. "Take out your books boys and girls and turn to page 76," he commands without expression. Skip looks to his left at a peer who rolls his eyes in disgust. Skip imitates the eye rolling. Skip then turns to the student on his right and, with exaggerated movements, rolls his eyes again. The student bursts into giggles. From his desk, Mr. Bernard looks at Skip and says, "Do you have a problem?" Skip shakes his head no. Mr. Bernard tells the class again to open their books to page 78. A student in the front row calls out, "You said page 76." Skip looks at his classmate to his left and rolls his eyes, this time adding an exaggerated head movement. The students on both sides of him giggle. Mr. Bernard, still sitting at his desk, calls out, "Is something funny in the back row?" Skip looks at Mr. Bernard and shakes his head no. When Mr. Bernard looks away, Skip makes a monkey face. The students sitting next to him laugh uncontrollably. Mr. Bernard, still sitting at his desk, inquires with a stern voice, "Skip, why don't you begin reading on page 76?" Skip replies, "I thought we were on page 78." A student from the front row calls out, "Yeah, you said page 78." Another student calls out, "He also said page 76." During this exchange, Skip intensifies his monkey faces. Several students from the row in front of him have turned to watch him. They are now giggling. Mr. Bernard, still sitting at his desk, slams down his book, stands up, and says, "All right boys and girls, turn to page 80. I want you to complete all ten of the chapter questions. We were going to complete these aloud in class, but since Skip and his friends can't control themselves, you'll do it as seat work. What you don't finish will be homework. No talking, or I'll add questions." Several students groan and glare at Skip. Skip shoves his book forward, away from himself, looks at his friend and shakes his finger, "tsk, tsk, tsk." The student looks away, as Skip crosses his arms in front of him and sits glaring at Mr. Bernard.

From your perspective, what seems to be the source or sources of the problem here? Take a second and jot down your answers.

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Now, let's take a look at how the consultee perceives the problem.

**CONSULTEE:** "I've about had it with Skip. He's disrupting my class a lot lately. Yesterday, for example, he was sitting in the back of the room making faces and getting all the kids around him to giggle. I've tried ignoring his behavior. I've also tried calling on him to keep him on his toes. But he just keeps on

making fun of everything, including me. I don't know what else to do."

Did you find that your interpretation differed from that of the consultee? Did you identify the consultee's behavior as a possible source of the problem? Often there will be several possible interpretations of the problem. Although most of the time you will probably be in congruence with the consultee, there will be times when your interpretation of a problem will significantly differ from that of the consultee. To ensure that the consultation remains collaborative and to eventually solve the problem, you and the consultee must arrive at a mutually agreed upon problem statement.

Problem identification is perhaps the most critical stage of the problem-solving process. There is research evidence indicating that once problem solving is carried through the problem identification stage, problem solution almost always results (Bergan & Tombari, 1976). In this stage of consultation, the problem is narrowed down, operationalized, and analyzed in terms of its possible causes and the factors or circumstances surrounding it. An accurate, objective problem identification forms the basis for the eventual selection of an intervention that is well targeted to the problem.

However, while problem identification might seem to be rather straightforward, in fact it is potentially the most difficult and challenging task that you and the consultee face in consultation. Why is it so difficult? As the above case descriptions illustrate, you and the consultee may have very different perceptions of what the problem is. It is evident from the consultee's description of Skip's behavior that he locates the problem in the student. However, he may have difficulty providing a clear, behavioral definition of the problem for a variety of reasons. Teachers often try to describe too many problems at once. They may be reluctant to express their real concern to you until trust is established and therefore present a "safe" problem first. Or, they may be experiencing confusion because many problems are occurring and they cannot separate out the essential elements of the problem (Gutkin & Curtis, 1982).

On the other hand, you might conclude from your observation as illustrated in the above case that the teacher has poor classroom management skills and is therefore a part of the problem. Inexperienced consultants have a tendency to rush through to the solution generation stage (Gutkin & Curtis, 1982). Therefore, you might be tempted to rush in and start suggesting classroom management interventions that you think the teacher should try. However, remember, this is collaborative consultation, and that means that you cannot impose on the teacher your own view of the problem or your ideas about solutions.

What the two of you must do instead is discuss the problem situation and reach agreement on what you are going to look at in the consultation. It is critical at this stage that the teacher believe that his or her concerns are being addressed. Only if the teacher participates in the definition of the problem will he or she buy into the problem-solving process and participate productively in it.

## Consider the Sources of the Problem

Classrooms are confusing and complex environments, with teachers and students interacting on many levels. Most problems involve students, the teacher, the system, and even certain extraneous variables to varying degrees. In the case provided at the beginning of this chapter, we saw that one could locate the source of the problem in Skip's lack of skill to participate in a large group discussion or his interest in obtaining the attention of his peers. We also saw that the problem could be located with the teacher and his lack of classroom management skills. A system problem could be that the classroom size is large and unmanageable, that the teacher is not certified to teach sixth grade, or that the required history textbook is outdated and boring. An extraneous factor could be that Mr. Bernard's lack of energy is the result of his wife recently giving birth to triplets who require his attention through the night.

As part of your job as a consultant, you must keep in mind that there are always several potential sources of the problem. As you observe in classrooms and as you listen to the teacher, you must in your head sort various descriptions and events into the various categories of student, teacher, system, and outside factors.

This sorting process will help you to organize all of the many forms of data that come in regarding the problem. Also, labeling or categorizing problems according to whether they are student, teacher, system, or an outside factor can help you avoid spending a large amount of time on issues that are not amenable to being handled in collaborative consultation. For example, a tendency to "blame the system" (e.g., class size is too large; the student needs to be in a different class) can lead to fruitless efforts since problems in the system are usually better addressed in a different kind of consultation known as organizational consultation (Parsons & Meyers, 1984).

Also, in collaborative consultation it is inappropriate to "blame" the teacher." You are cooperating with the teacher to enhance student performance in the classroom. Judging the teacher, or allowing the teacher to blame others for the student's performance, does not facilitate problem solving.

Following is an example of how a problem situation could be analyzed by sorting possible sources of the problem into the four general areas of pupil, teacher, system, or extraneous factors.

### Case: Ms. Nelson

Ms. Nelson is a teacher of primary aged children in a non-graded program. She believes in nurturing the children and rarely raises her voice to them. Three of her students have developmental disabilities. Since September she has only averaged two days of teaching a week. As a result of district reorganization and its emphasis on educating children in least restrictive settings, she attended four new IEP conferences in early September and four team meetings in late September. Also, she had jury duty the month of October. This is in addition to her mother's illness, which has kept her busy in the evenings since July.

It is now December and no discipline routines have been established for her fifteen students. Further, it is getting harder to find substitutes because they complain that the class is too unruly.

Take a few minutes and identify the different sources contributing to the problematic situation in Ms. Nelson's class.

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Here are some examples of possible sources:

- Student source: Students do not have the social skills to behave in group instruction situations.
- Teacher source: Teacher is afraid of being too harsh with young children and finds it hard to be firm with her expectations for them.
- System source: Teachers must attend many conferences as a result of the reorganization.
- Extraneous factor source: Teacher's mother is ill and she had jury duty for a month.

Identifying the possible sources of the problematic situation enables you to sift through the many variables having an impact on the problem. It helps you focus on those aspects which are manageable and within the teacher's control to solve. It also helps you save time, because it reduces the emphasis given to discussing those variables that are unchangeable.

### Activity

## Identifying Possible Sources of the Problem

In this activity, you practice identifying possible sources of the problem situation.

For the following problem situation, identify possible sources.

Frank and Jimmy are second graders with suspected learning disabilities. They are classmates in Ms. Burton's second grade class, where they exhibit difficulty staying on task, completing work, and follow-

ing instruction. Ms. Burton referred them to special education a month ago, and since that time, they have been found on numerous occasions playing in the hallway during class time. Ms. Burton claims that with 28 students to manage, not to mention a shortage of materials and the music teacher conducting band and choir in the room next door, she cannot be responsible for Frank and Jimmy's behavior. Besides, she argues, they are not hurting anyone, unlike another one of her students who picks fights with other children at least once a day.

Student Source: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher Source: \_\_\_\_\_

System Source: \_\_\_\_\_

Extraneous Source: \_\_\_\_\_

Possible Student Sources: Frank and Jimmy lack the skills necessary for staying on task in the classroom.

Possible Teacher Sources: Ms. Burton may lack the behavioral management and instructional skills necessary for working with Frank and Jimmy. Or, she may have relinquished ownership for these students now that they are referred to special education.

Possible System Sources: The lack of instructional materials available to Ms. Burton; perhaps a class size that is too large given the diversity of student needs in the classroom; the location of her class next to the music room.

Possible Extraneous Sources: None noted.

Now that you have analyzed the possible sources of this situation, where do you think is the best place to begin? The next section offers suggestions for defining the problem.

## Defining the Problem

The problem identification stage of consultation is a complex task. First, you cannot impose your own views on the teacher but must proceed in such a way that you both agree on the problem area that you are going to look at. Second, the fact that most problems can have several sources means that you and the consultee will need to do some investigating before you can develop a complete picture of the problem.

To navigate your way through this all-important stage of consultation, you might consider dividing the stage into several mini steps as follows.

- Tentative Identification of the Problem
- Collection of Relevant Data

- Problem Diagnosis and Statement of Goal

These mini-steps are described in the following sections.

### **Tentative Problem Identification**

You and the consultee must work together at this stage so that you can agree on a tentative problem statement expressed in specific, concrete, behavioral terms. Coming up with such a statement may seem reductionist, especially when the problem seems so complex and multi-faceted. However, it is important to state the problem specifically for several reasons. First, you and the consultee may come from different worlds (e.g., general and special education) and stating the problem in concrete terms devoid of technical jargon ensures that you will both have a common understanding of the problem as stated. Second, the consultee may tend at this stage to describe the student as having multiple problems or as having a global problem such as being off task or unruly. Narrowing the problem to a concrete description of behavior encourages the consultee to describe which specific thing is bothering him or her the most or which specific behavior is the critical one that needs to be addressed first (Witt & Elliott, 1983).

In the case of Skip, the consultee seems to be very concerned about Skip's behavior and its effect on the class. Therefore, your tentative problem statement would explore the consultee's general expression of concern while narrowing it down as in the following: "Skip is giggling during social studies class discussion and not responding to questions directed to him." If the problem is academic or instructional in nature, it will also need to be stated precisely: "Susan is does not complete math homework assignments in division."

How can you get the consultee to begin thinking of the problem in more specific terms? At this all-important stage of consultation, you face a dilemma. You have to elicit information from the consultee in order to tentatively define the problem you are going to focus on; however, at the same time, you must maintain or facilitate your collaborative relationship with the consultee (Rosenfield, 1987).

It is easy to get into trouble here. You may be so intent on gaining information about the problem that you start to ask the consultee a lot of questions, one after the other, to find out what you think is important. You have now taken on the role of the expert who knows what information is important, thereby undermining collaboration. In addition, your questioning may be counter-productive. The consultee may give you answers, but, feeling uncomfortable about being on the receiving end of all of your questions, may hesitate to reveal things which concern him or her and which are relevant to the problem (Rosenfield, 1987).

Here is an example of questioning which might put the consultee on the defensive. You ask the consultee the following questions, one right after the other.

"What about Jamie's attendance?"

"What's his behavior like in class?"

"How does he get along with the other kids?"

“How does he behave when you assign seat work to the class?”

“Have you ever asked him if he likes your class?”

“How do the other students respond to Jamie?”

The consultee may wonder what the agenda behind your questions is and how his or her answers are going to be used. Rather than sharing his or her true concerns about the problem, the consultee is likely to react to your questions by resisting or becoming defensive. Or, he or she could decide that caution is the best course in answering your questions. In both cases, collaboration is not taking place and you are not obtaining the important information you need.

What are the alternatives to what can be perceived as “grilling the teacher?” At this stage of consultation, it is particularly important that you listen to and try to understand what the **consultee** thinks is important about the problem. Using certain basic communication and listening skills will enable you to both elicit information and maintain collaboration.

You can ask the teacher to clarify for you something that he or she has just said that you have found confusing. When asking for clarification, you might say to the teacher: “I’m not sure I understood what you just said.” Or, you might ask, “What do you mean by ...?” Examples of typical terms used by teachers which have multiple interpretations and need clarifying are short attention span, reading problem, off task, immature, disruptive, and slow. By honestly indicating your confusion to the consultee, you are no longer the expert who knows and understands everything through some kind of special insight. Instead, you are indicating that some things are still unclear to you and that the consultee has important information to offer (Conoley & Conoley, 1982; Rosenfield, 1987).

With paraphrasing, you indicate to the consultee your level of understanding of what he or she just said. In other words, you test your understanding of the consultee’s message by putting it into your own words and restating it to the consultee. The major purpose of paraphrasing is to avoid misunderstandings which can occur when you think the consultee meant one thing with a particular statement when, in fact, he or she meant something else (Rosenfield, 1987).

Here is an example of when paraphrasing would be useful. The consultee says, “Susan is having a terrible time with math this year.” Thinking that the problem is academic in nature, your paraphrase would be: “In other words, Susan is not learning her math facts well enough to be successful on her assignments.” The teacher might correct you by saying, “No, it’s not that, she just can’t seem to remain in her seat when we are doing problems.” Based on the teacher’s last statement, you would start to explore Susan’s behavior in class, a direction that may not have been followed if you had just assumed that you knew what the teacher was talking about. Paraphrasing does not mean that you are able to state the problem better than the teacher or in more technical, jargon-like terms. Once again, you are not playing the expert here, but are leaving yourself open to correction in an effort to achieve a clear understanding of what the teacher is saying (Rosenfield, 1987).

There are additional listening strategies which you can use to encourage the

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consultee to generate useful information. With acknowledging, you use words or expressions such as, "good," "umm hmm," "right" while the consultee is speaking. When reflecting, you repeat back to the consultee words or phrases he or she has used. Your purpose here is to emphasize something that has been said or to guide the content of the interview in what seems to be a fruitful direction (Conoley & Conoley, 1982). An example of reflecting would be as follows.

"I'm at the end of my rope with Arnold. Every other word out of his mouth is filthy. He has no respect for me or anyone else."

The consultant could reflect any one of these phrases. To respond to the first, the consultant might focus on the consultee's emotions and state, "Oh, you're feeling frustrated." If the consultant chooses to focus on the behavior, he or she might state, "So Arnold has a repertoire of swear words?" Or, the consultant might choose to pursue the effect Arnold's behavior is having and ask, "It sounds as if Arnold's choice of words is communicating disrespect."

A good way to indicate that you value and want to use the ideas of the teacher is to use elaboration, a technique in which you build on what the teacher has just said. An example of elaboration would be: "Given what you have just said about the problem, ..."

Finally, it is helpful to use summarizing to indicate to the consultee that you have indeed listened carefully to all that he or she has just said. Summarizing the consultee's message in a few statements can be a good stopping point in a discussion of the problem (Conoley & Conoley, 1982).

In summary, all of these communication and listening techniques encourage the consultee to become involved in the problem definition process and to become convinced that the information he or she has to offer is important. The goal of using these techniques is, first, to get the teacher to talk about critical aspects of the problem, something which will only happen if you establish an atmosphere for the interview which is not threatening in any way. Second, you want to do everything you can to avoid the misunderstandings that can occur when you assume that you understand the teacher's description of the problem. By using good communication techniques, you explore with the teacher the meaning of statements or expressions and achieve a common understanding of them. Your initial problem statement has a good chance of being accurate and of reflecting the teacher's true concerns.