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Advisory Committees:
Vocational Education's Quality Circles

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Abstract: Quality circles have become well known in management for their ability to improve internal efficiency and quality while motivating employees to participate in a cohesive team effort. They function as voluntary groups of advisors representing all aspects of a particular operation who make recommendations to **administration**. Likewise, advisory committees are comprised of health care community leaders who serve in an advisory capacity on a voluntary basis. The mission of an advisory committee is to provide suggestions and recommendations which will help assure that graduates of the vocational-technical program are skilled, competent, and technologically current workers. The mission of quality circles is to provide suggestions and

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recommendations which will enhance the operations and management of an organization.

Therefore, the quality assurance provided by the internal quality circle is very similar to that of the external advisory committee. The similarities, differences and functions of each group are explored in this article.

Total Quality Management (TQM) is a popular concept among businesses and industries.

TQM means that the organization's culture is **defined** by and supports the constant attainment of customer **satisfaction** through an integrated system of tools, techniques, and training. This involves the continuous improvement of organizational processes, resulting in high quality products and services (**Sashkin & Kiser**, 1993, p. 39).

TQM includes three primary functions which also are found in health occupations education: tools and techniques (statistics, quality circles, teamwork), customers (students, employers, patients), and organizational culture (an appreciation and recognition of the value and contributions of all health care professionals) (**Sashkin & Kiser**, 1993). Health occupations education (HOE) programs, therefore, can benefit from TQM. Quality circles (advisory committees) are a TQM technique particularly applicable to HOE.

Health occupations educators often experience difficulty in communicating the importance of advisory committees to representatives of health care providers in the community. When this happens, attendance at advisory committee meetings, as well as valuable technical input, is lost. Proper communication is the key. Educators and administrators frequently use different terminologies for similar concepts. An administrator

may not have a working knowledge of **the responsibilities** and functions of an advisory committee, but that same **administrator** would instantly relate to the terminology and concept of quality circles. To allow the two arenas to interlock, educators need to understand fully **their** similarities and differences. Recruitment of **excellent** advisory committee members is enhanced when the educator uses terms and concepts familiar to health care professionals to explain philosophy and purpose. In other words, educators can sell the idea of advisory committee membership to health care representatives by using the quality circle concept as a communication technique.

Quality Circles

Quality circles (QCs) are **defined** as being “comprised of small groups of employees who voluntarily meet on a regular basis to identify, analyze, and develop solutions to problems, and to implement those solutions when feasible” (Lloyd & **Rehg**, 1983, p. 7). The QC concept was developed by W. Edwards **Deming** in the late 1940s as a method for increasing worker productivity and product quality control. In 1949, Japan invited **Deming** to present his approach to Japanese industrialists. Convinced of the merit of QCS as a management process, Japanese executives began the process of training, implementing, and developing QCS throughout their industries. However, **optimum** benefits from QCS were not realized until the 1960s because their value had to be proven at each level of management (Lloyd & **Rehg**, 1983). “The quality circle technique is best used in the context of an organization-wide quality improvement effort” (Sashkin & **Kiser**, 1993, p. 8). **Thus**, QCS are an **integral** part of total quality management, which is committed to continuous quality improvement.

In 1972, Lockheed Company became the first business in the United States to

implement the QC management style formally. Their success with QCS spawned a whirlwind of changes that continue today. QCS have become a recognized management method for humanizing the workplace through the active participation of workers. Company loyalty, as well as quality control, has dramatically increased. "It is evident that a world-wide revolution in management has occurred" (Lloyd & Rehg, 1983, p. 6).

One of the major advantages of QCS has been increased job satisfaction as a result of worker suggestions being heard and implemented. Increased job satisfaction has led to decreased turnover rates, increased work quality, and improved attitudes toward the company in general. Another advantage has been the team building effects of QCS. QC teams cover all levels of employment in a particular unit. To be effective, team building skills such as leadership, cooperation, and compromise must be developed. The unit QC becomes solidified in its purpose to improve the unit (Ingle, 1982).

Advisory Committees

The establishment of advisory councils (committees) is required by federal law for all vocational-technical education programs. There are three primary levels of advisory committees: (a) local, (b) state, and (c) national. The local advisory committee is charged to provide "advice on current job needs and on the relevancy of courses" (Public Law 94-482, 1976, Sec. 105g). In carrying out their mission, the advisory committees' activities naturally fall into one of seven function areas:

1. curriculum content advisement;
2. equipment, facilities, and instruction review;

3. community resource coordination;
4. career guidance and placement services;
5. program evaluation;
6. community public relations; and
7. professional development (Cochran, Phelps, & Cochran, 1980, p. 58).

Elias and Behymer (1979) conducted a study designed to produce a ranking of advisory committee activities according to importance. The activity ranked most important was to “consider manpower needs and advise on the initiation of new programs or the **modification/termination** of existing programs in the light of these needs” (p. 295). In fact, 10 of the 15 top ranked activities pertained to the integration of community, business and industry needs with **school/program** concerns. The lowest ranked activities (out of 47) involved committee members interacting with students and teachers in a **formal manner**; i.e. screening applicants, arranging field trips, conducting teacher **preservice/in-service programs**, providing advice on business practices, and developing aptitude tests.

Characteristics of Quality Circles

Generally, a QC will consist of three to **fifteen** employees, with the **preferred** size being five to ten, Groups must be relatively small to afford opportunities for participation and to facilitate consensus. Membership in a QC should be on a voluntary basis. As a rule, QCs meet once a week for one hour. Some orientation and training is provided members in the roles, functions, and processes of QCS (Lloyd & Rehg, 1983).

Basic skills needed in effective QC management are brainstorming, data interpretation, cause and effect analysis, and solution synthesis. Additionally, QC members must be able to

apply their knowledge and experience to the problem being addressed. Once a solution has been developed and implemented, the QC members are responsible for determining its effectiveness (Lloyd & Rehg, 1983).

In order to be successful, the QC must have the support of management. This support is evidenced by the management's willingness to listen to and implement QC recommendations, to provide time for meetings, to provide data, and to be actively involved when invited. Without management support, QC members will be unable to maintain their energy and motivation (Ingle, 1982).

Characteristics of Advisory Committees

The size of an advisory committee usually ranges from a minimum of five members to a maximum of twenty-five. Members should be representative of the local health care employers who hire program graduates. One or two HOE graduates, as well as one or two faculty who teach prerequisite academic courses, should be included. Individuals selected for membership should be competent, recognized leaders who can donate the interest, time, and character necessary for exerting a positive influence on education. The usual term of appointment is three years, but may be shortened or extended based on the desires of the individual. Usually, meetings are held at least twice a year.

“The specific purposes of an advisory committee are to advise, counsel, and assist in the planning, development and evaluation of a school system's vocational education programs” (Oklahoma Council on Vocational Education, 1988, p. 1). Advisory committees serve as a primary influence on a community, which in turn directly reflects on the school and program (Rippey & Vickers, 1978). Members are responsible for attending and participating in

meetings, making suggestions and recommendations, keeping the program abreast of new technologies and procedures, evaluating curriculum and facilities, and assisting with employment and placement needs (Oklahoma Council on Vocational Education, 1988). To be effective, advisory committees must have good **leadership** and the support of school administrators. This support is reflected in the value placed on the program's advisory committee through administrative communications and **liasons** (Dunn & Hoemer, 1984).

Dissimilarities in Function

Advisory committees are formed for the purpose of providing long-term advice to an educational program in order that the graduates of the **program** might reach their **full** employability potential. This guidance assures that the program stays in touch with present and future business and industry trends and issues. **In** contrast, quality circles are organized for the primary purpose of solving a **specific** problem. Once the solution is implemented and evaluated, that particular **QC** may be disbanded. **QCS** **generally** address problems impacting efficiency or quality. Advisory committees, on the other hand, address the competency needs of the health care community as well as those of students.

Practical Applications for Advisory Committees

Although quality circles and **advisory** committees are not quite the same **in structure** or function, there are characteristics common to both. An **advisory** committee can be used as a quality circle made up of external representatives from the health care community who are willing to donate their services and resources in an effort to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of schools or individual **programs**. There are several different types of

advisory committees which are utilized according to their particular function or

responsibility.

In order for an advisory committee to function properly, it is necessary for individual teachers, staff members, and school administrators to have a practical philosophy that supports the utilization of advisory committees in all program areas. The school district or administration should draft a philosophical statement that outlines the functional guidelines and responsibilities of advisory committees as they are being utilized by the programs in that district. Careful consideration should be given to determining the selection process and the role of committee members. Advisory committee members should be given a thorough orientation to their responsibilities and level of authority. An advisory committee booklet consisting of philosophical statements should be provided to each advisory committee member. This same information should be provided to all employees that are involved with programs and advisory committees.

The formation of a successful, productive advisory committee that does more than just meet and eat is not an accident. A great deal of planning, organization, involvement, commitment, and consistency by all parties is necessary to realize the full potential of this unique external quality circle management technique called an advisory committee.

Responsibilities of Advisory Committees

In a basic sense, the primary function of advisory committees is to make recommendations or give advice. An advisory committee is not an elected board and does not have the authority to make policies, rules or regulations that govern a local school. The responsibility for decision making rests with administration and the Board of Education.

Advisory committee members should understand from the beginning that the Board of Education may not adopt all or any part of their recommendations. Should the advisory committee feel that their recommendations have not received adequate consideration, the chairperson may request a meeting with the school's chief administrator.

Major functions of the advisory committee should be to assist in the improvement and updating of course content and programs. Broader functions include student placement assistance, student recruitment suggestions, potential teacher recommendations, and support of the various public relations activities for individual programs.

Involvement in political issues and legislative concerns should be handled discreetly and as cooperative efforts with local administration. Another major area of support can be in the area of equipment and supplies information that help keep the program technologically up-to-date. An effective advisory committee should adopt a number of activities that can be targeted as primary objectives for the year. Appropriate individuals and subcommittees should be assigned to monitor and promote each specific activity until results are achieved. The responsibilities of the advisory committee represent an effective external quality circle that can have a positive impact on health care programs. Advisory committees are specific external quality circles which can be valuable tools in transforming average programs into dynamic, state-of-the-arts programs.

How to Have a Successful Advisory Committee

Maintaining a successful or productive advisory committee is more involved than just holding a meeting or two and submitting a brief report from those who attended. An effective advisory committee is the result of careful planning, selection, and follow-through

on **specific** items that are often small and seemingly inconsequential. The following items are but a few of the techniques that can assist in making an advisory committee's contribution effective.

1. Select members that are willing and able to serve.
2. Establish meeting times, dates, and locations that are appropriate for members.
3. Notify appropriate school officials well in advance.
4. Prepare agendas and adhere to them as closely as possible.
5. Keep minutes from meetings and provide two-way communication procedures.
6. If possible, plan refreshments or luncheon type meeting arrangements.
7. Provide a good environment for meetings.
8. Utilize key people to take leadership roles on **specific** committee items.
9. Recognize accomplishments of individuals through appropriate public relations.

Conclusions

A comparison of advisory committees and quality circles reveals many similarities and some **differences**. The groups are small and hold regular meetings in which **all** members are expected to participate. Membership is voluntary. The groups function by suggesting and recommending changes, planning and implementing those changes, and evaluating the effectiveness of these changes. Problem solving skills are needed by both groups, although QCS need a higher level of skill and are expected to spend more time solving problems. The ultimate effectiveness of the groups depends on the support of top administrators, both in theory and practice. Administrators and managers understand the concept of QCS.

Therefore, an excellent communication technique to utilize with committee members is to define the advisory committee in terms of quality circles and total quality management.

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