Level 0 assessment works out bugs, works in stakeholders

"Is this design powerful enough to get the results we intend?" This question is the logical place to start evaluation of a professional development program. Planning groups often pass the draft plan to a few stakeholders to peruse, but don’t typically assess the draft’s potential in any systematic way.

Some argue that testing a draft plan is not worthwhile, that any plan is only a guesstimate of what will work based on the best information available at the time. They are correct that no program on paper guarantees success, and to get significant results from professional development requires that every plan be flexible and tweaked periodically, based on the formative data collected.

Despite the lack of guarantees, any professional development program that achieves significant results owes much of that success to starting with a substantive design — one that uses knowledge accumulated about learning and change.

Thoughtful, collaborative “Level 0” assessment of a draft plan is usually worth the time and effort invested. Early assessment can identify calendar glitches, head off implementation problems, leverage efforts and reduce duplication, and prevent costly errors. Equally important, involving stakeholders in the assessment exercise can expand their understanding of quality professional development and increase the number of true believers in the plan, contributing to its power to achieve long-term results.

INVOLVE CRITICAL FRIENDS IN A FRESH LOOK

Assessing the draft plan is an opportunity to involve stakeholders as critical friends. Joan L. Herman et al. offered a useful perspective in Evaluator’s Handbook (Herman, Morris, & Fitz-Gibbon, 1987): “Evaluation, in short, is an endeavor which is partly social, partly political, and only partly technical” (p. 11). At this stage, critical friends can offer a fresh look at the draft plan before it is initiated, suggest improvements, and validate its strengths.

If a planning committee has developed the draft, those committee members need be only minimally involved at this point. Others without close ties to the plan need to make their own assessments and recommendations.

Which stakeholders to involve depends on the specific dimensions of the plan needing a second look, and who might have concerns. Consider inviting content consultants from outside the organization, leaders of the teachers or principals association, content experts within the organization, state department of education representatives, staff developers or curriculum coordinators, parent representatives, school board members, and classroom teachers with experience and opinions about professional development models proposed in the draft design.

ORGANIZE A PROCESS TO SCRUTINIZE THE DRAFT

Carefully organize the process to focus on those elements of the design most crucial for getting significant results, and not on tangential aspects of the draft document:

1. Edit the draft carefully before inviting feedback to avoid having the focus be on typographical errors, grammar, layout, word choice, etc.
2. Develop a scoring guide, such as a checklist, rubric, question/comment sheet, criteria matrix, or an Innovation Configuration to capture the feedback and make tabulation simple.
3. Provide a graphic organizer of how the program will support learning and change. A graphic organizer rather than text alone can help some people better understand the plan’s underlying approach to learning and change.
5. Decide how the stakeholders’ responses will be tabulated, analyzed, summarized and reported.

Critical friends can analyze the plan independently, in established instructional or content teams, in ad hoc groups formed according to particular expertise, or in a large faculty meeting or retreat. Three ways to organize the work are:

A. Everyone jointly studies the plan and rates it on all dimensions;
B. Small groups or individuals independently rate the
plan on one dimension and report back to the group; or

C. A combination of A and B. Some of the plan’s dimensions are assessed with everyone’s input. Other dimensions are rated concurrently by selected small groups with particular expertise.

**LOOK AT SEVERAL DIMENSIONS OF THE DESIGN**

To avoid getting mired in the process of collecting second opinions, prioritize the dimensions you see as crucial to the plan’s success. Some perspectives or tools to use in scrutinizing a draft professional development plan are:

- **The National Staff Development Council Standards (Revised 2001).** The revised NSDC standards are based on accumulated research and best practice. They are conveniently organized around the three building blocks of learning programs: content, process, and context. The standards can be the scaffolding for developing the original draft of your program design and can be used again as a tool to assess the draft plan’s potential.

- **Content area national standards and state frameworks.** Professional development planners often use these standards as initial points of reference because student learning results are evaluated according to the standards. However, planning groups may veer off course during the planning process. Scrutinize the draft plan for its potential to help teachers use the frameworks to guide student achievement.

- **Underlying research.** In the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act, any improvement plan written today likely will cite the research underlying the decisions. That includes research on professional development content and models. The underlying research can be readily examined if the planners have done their homework and if those assessing the draft know how to recognize different kinds and quality of research.

- **Alignment with student learning priorities.** Alignment between the content of staff learning and student learning needs may be the original intention of the planning group, but sometimes as plans expand the focus wavers. Constant review is especially critical in situations where competing priorities creep in and weaken the plan. A plan with multiple priorities usually has no real priorities.

- **Timeline.** An unrealistic timeline frequently leads to disappointing results. Any plan expected to improve student learning should be a multiyear effort with segments of time allotted for teachers and instructional teams to learn and refine the new protocols.

- **Models of professional development.** Pressure to accelerate staff learning and build momentum for improvement means finding creative ways for adults to learn in the workplace, not just at periodic professional development workshops. The challenge in designing any professional development program is to select models not because they are trendy, but because they are the best choice to help a particular staff learn particular content in a particular context.

- **Formative assessment.** Data collection to monitor progress should be clearly outlined in the professional development draft calendar. The plan should specify that evaluators use a variety of qualitative and quantitative formative data to track progress and determine what alterations are needed to reach the long-term goals. (See Taking Measure in the summer 2002 *Journal of Staff Development*).

- **Change and collaboration.** The design should be built on what we know about the complexity of individual learning and change, including the often overlooked concept of building a critical mass (see Skill Shop in the summer 1999 *Journal of Staff Development*) to achieve organizational change. The document should clearly identify how learning activities are aligned with the phases of change — initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. The plan should include time for staff to work collaboratively, to build internal capacity for leadership and change, and to take ownership of the initiative.

- **Follow-up.** Any plan intent on getting results should clearly show that follow-up is the most significant part of the professional development effort. Follow-up may be differentiated to meet staff’s varying needs for practice and support. A good plan will have follow-up activities across the whole timeline.

- **Resources.** One dimension that deserves a hard look is the feasibility of implementing the program with available resources. A good plan should also show how resources and opportunities within and outside the organization will be strategically leveraged to maximize their impact.

- **Your own lessons learned.** Every organization has its own history and culture. Use your own lessons learned from the most and least successful professional development efforts by examining the plan from that perspective.

Professional development programs can fail due to a multitude of miscalculations, but a shaky original design is nearly always the source problem. In this era of accountability, an integral part of program planners’ responsibility should be to facilitate systematic formative assessment of all professional development designs.

**REFERENCE**