Serving as an “inside consultant” on staff development can have valuable long-term benefits to your organization and, ultimately, to your students. The role demands a range of skills and knowledge. It also requires that you seize every opportunity to build widespread understanding of staff development issues, even those five-minute openings in meeting discussions.

Put yourself in this scenario:
You are sitting in the first meeting of an ad hoc committee. The group is mapping out the plan for a high-priority district initiative. The charge is that by the third year of implementation, students will show benefits from this new push. You have been asked to participate for several reasons, including your expertise in staff development.

The conversation turns to potential staff development designs. People state their likes and dislikes, horror stories, and successes. You sense that the group is in an action mode. You are concerned that they might move too quickly with some big decisions and make expensive, strategic missteps. You hear lots of staff development design ideas around the table but many of the proposed designs ultimately won’t be powerful enough to build the critical mass necessary for the desired results with students.

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Like any committee member, you can optimistically expect to have the group’s attention for a maximum of five minutes without interruption.

• What would you advise the group about quality staff development if you were given five minutes in the meeting?

Let’s unpack the scenario. This district initiative could be a prime opportunity to influence the quality and results of staff development on a system level. As with all consulting work, the challenge is figuring out how to do that given the mix of factors influencing the context. In this case, you’re a member of a project committee trying to influence results within the confines of a committee meeting.

Project committee meetings are often fraught with hazards. There are the typical power struggles, unspoken collusions, the mix of global vs. analytical planning styles that people immediately display. Add competing priorities, conflicting beliefs and personal biases about staff development. Plus you have the pressures of limited time.

Regardless of the constraints, you don’t want to miss the opportunity to help the group begin thinking about staff development in a different way. You can coach yourself so that you can make your best shot in the meeting. One way to coach yourself is to prompt yourself with a series of questions. Here are five questions I use to coach myself and avoid fumbling the ball:

• What information would be most useful to the group right now?

Select and prioritize your key points before beginning to speak. Many of us more talkative
staff developers make the mistake of launching into a mini-seminar on quality staff development. Sometimes a well-placed sentence or quote has more impact.

Avoid blurring your message by covering too many aspects of staff development. In your five-minute speech, you can’t cover everything from “reflection” to “outcomes” to “follow-up.” To group members not familiar with staff development, it can all sound like a mishmash of jargon and platitudes.

- What framework might help us move forward?

Often a discussion begs for a framework to link ideas and extend the thinking. In this meeting, committee members have advocated specific “pieces” of a staff development design — favorite speakers, models, and materials. If you now add only more program design possibilities to the conversation without a framework, you could actually add disagreement rather than increased understanding.

As a staff or organizational developer, you probably have a favorite mental framework that you use to design big initiatives. If not, develop or adopt one that you can explain easily. I usually begin with a familiar framework that shows three phases of the change process: Initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. On that, I superimpose the different levels of staff development outcomes to show the connection between change and levels of training. Some people find this useful. Some don’t. Not every idea you propose will be golden. Avoid falling in love with your ideas.

Remember that when you’re a consultant, whether you’re working inside or outside the organization, you are not in charge. Consultants assist, advise, add expertise and experience, diagnose, or help find solutions to problems. Your role is not to make decisions but to add knowledge and help equip a committee or leader to decide.

- What evidence or rationale might be useful?

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You may or may not be called upon to give an in-depth explanation of the rationale underlying issues on the table. It is important to your credibility as a consultant to be prepared to do so. If committee members hear any paradigm-busting ideas about staff development issues or designs, expect hard questions and challenges.

Before any meeting, think about why you would advocate particular staff development design elements. If you’re drawing from personal experiences in schools, be able to explain all aspects of the experience clearly. Your committee will want specifics, including the chronology of the project and how you tracked its impact on students.

In addition to personal experiences, your ideas might be guided by research findings that have impressed you. If you decide to refer to research or theory, be cautious. Educators are hard sells when it comes to knowledge derived from research and theory. We’re good at punching holes in experimental or quasi-experimental studies and experts, at batting down theories and generalizations gleaned from correlational studies. Select only strong, recent studies done by respected researchers with a sample group and context similar to your district. If you quote statistics, know how the calculations were done.

Quoting from the NSDC standards for staff development can be powerful. Standards are widely used in all fields and the NSDC is well-known and respected. The NSDC standards are derived from best practices and research and are nationally recognized. However, you need to be able to explain the rationale behind each of the standards and know how to use them in planning. (See the NSDC web site for background in this area, www.nsdc.org/standards.htm.)

- What concrete examples will help emphasize my point?

Concrete examples, real stories, and illustrations are valuable tools for consultants. For example, if you’re pushing for job-embedded staff development, can you point to real schools where that happens? Collect good quotes, examples, stories, and illustrations. Practice using them so you can explain them without hesitation and without rambling. The feedback you get will help you determine whether they are “keepers.”

- What exactly can the group do next?

Don’t wait to be asked for specific help on next steps. Committees often need information and a plan before they can make their decisions. You might offer to bring articles or books to enhance their knowledge, arrange a field trip for them to see a particular staff development design in action, or bring in a speaker who has experience in a needed area.

Remember that, as a consultant, your job is to help others succeed. You succeed when you have built the capabilities of the group. If you do your job really well, the group will need you less and less as the project moves forward.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

A list of background reading for this article appears on the NSDC web site, www.nsdc.org/library.htm