

# Consultative Problem-Solving for Turbocharged Learning

Michael Brandwein, Gwynn Powell, Jennifer Selke

## I. THE GOAL

- A. Our focus is on making these experiences more “learner-centered”
1. *In the traditional format, an expert “pours” information into the learner*
  2. *In a learner-centered experience, the participants actively participate in their own learning*
    - a) they have more responsibility
    - b) the leader acts more like a facilitator, guiding and coaching participants to make their own discoveries
  3. *The big pay-off: It’s not just solutions*
    - a) In learner-centered experiences, the participants don’t just figure things out
    - b) **They also learn HOW to figure things out**
      - (1) in other words, instead of just identifying what to do in a particular situation, they practice essential life skills that can be used in solving problems and working collaboratively in the future
    - c) In summary: they don’t just learn stuff; they learn HOW to learn on their own



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## II. WE CALL THIS “CONSULTATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING”

- A. Here is a quick summary of the three steps
1. *Step One: Individuals identify problems or challenges they’d like help with*
  2. *Step Two: They get into a small group of about six people*
  3. *Step Three: Each person takes a turn being the “client,” getting advice from the others, who serve as “consultants”*
- B. **Step One**
1. *Participants take a few minutes to write quietly, on their own, identifying two problems or challenges (or more if they’d like) about which they would like to get advice, ideas, and help from others*
  2. *Albert Einstein once wrote: “If I had sixty minutes to save the world, I’d spend the first fifty defining the problem.”*

3. *To prepare for success, I should do this in my writing:*
- a) What I write down should be important enough to be worth talking about
    - (1) In other words, we're in charge of value; we should ask about something that will make us feel our limited time was well spent
  - b) The subject should be one about which I'm sincerely open-minded
    - (1) There are some things that we know we may have very fixed ideas about, even if we feel we shouldn't. So, especially the first time we try this type of problem-solving, we should pick something that doesn't trigger our defenses—something about which we're interested in hearing other perspectives and approaches
  - c) I should make notes so that I can succinctly present one of these problems or challenges in about sixty seconds
  - d) I should briefly include any limitations or special considerations that would be important for my consultants to know
  - e) I want to be prepared to briefly tell my consultants about anything I've already tried that was not successful or satisfactory
    - (1) this helps us show that we've tried to work on this and are not "wimping out" by relying on other people to "save" us
    - (2) it can be helpful to the consultants to know what options we've already tried; they may want to know what happened and may have suggestions about how to try the option again in a different way
  - f) Finally, I should be ready to say exactly what I would like to happen or my desired result or goal

#### C. **Step Two**

1. *We get into groups of about six people*
2. *If we want to work on teambuilding and/or we want new ideas, these should be people we do not know or with whom we work or communicate less frequently than others*
3. *As soon as our group is formed, we introduce ourselves*
4. *Finally, we decide who will begin and serve as the first client*

#### D. **Step Three**

1. *One person is the client and the others are consultants*
2. *The client states the problem or challenge in sixty seconds or less*
3. *The consultants can ask questions, but only to help define the problem*
4. *The consultants take brief turns providing ideas about things to try*
  - a) please notice the words "things to try" – this means **the advice should focus on concise, specific, and practical action steps**
5. *The total time for Step Three is about 8-10 minutes*
  - a) in one sense, of course, the short time period is frustrating, and it should be acknowledged that this is not the only way to do problem-solving in a group; some problem-solving should have extended, in depth discussion
  - b) but when we use consultative problem-solving technique, it's the time pressure that efficiently provides a large number of useful ideas in a very short period of time

- (1) the short time forces people to stay highly focused and provides great practice in concentrated listening and succinct communication

E. An important technique to use **AFTER THE FIRST ROUND OF CONSULTATION**

1. *For the first round, where the client presents the first problem, you (as the facilitator) should announce that you will keep track of the time*
  - a) make it very clear to everyone that the groups should not move to the second client until you call time after round one
2. *Call time after 8-10 minutes*
3. *Ask everyone to do some quick thinking and discussion with you as a large group*
  - a) Begin by asking: "Now that we've been through this once, and before we do more, let's ask ourselves some questions that will help us as we continue. What are some ways for the **client** to mess up this process?"
    - (1) "In other ways, what are some bad things the client could do that would serve as barriers to success?"
    - (2) Point out that there are no wrong answers to this question and lead a brief discussion.
    - (3) A few examples that participants might suggest would be:
      - (a) "Oh, I've tried that; it won't work."
      - (b) "Nothing will work."
      - (c) "We don't do things that way."
      - (d) "You don't understand..."
      - (e) *avoid eye contact*
      - (f) *arms crossed*
      - (g) *shake head negatively*
  - b) Now ask: "And what are some things that the **client** could do that would increase the chance of success?"
    - (1) take notes
    - (2) listen carefully to all of the ideas, whether the client necessarily agrees or not, and keep moving around the circle to get everyone's suggestions
    - (3) ask brief questions to explore the comments more deeply
    - (4) "That's very helpful."
    - (5) "That gives me a lot to think about. That's valuable."
    - (6) "Thank you."
    - (7) "Chris, excuse me — before you tell me more about that, could we get some ideas from some of the others so that everyone gets a chance to weigh in? Thanks..."
      - (a) *(this technique is used to keep someone from monopolizing the session)*
  - c) Now ask: "Let's think about the **consultants**. First, what could they do to get in the way of success?"



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- (1) examples here might include:
  - (a) *talking all at one time instead of taking turns*
  - (b) *telling “war stories”*
  - (c) *turning the focus on themselves instead of the client: “You think that’s a problem! Ha! Let me tell you what happened to us eleven years ago...”*
  - (d) *“As an experienced person, I can tell you that...” (acting in a condescending way, or implying superiority)*
  - (e) *“Well, obviously, what you’ve done wrong is...” (provoking defensiveness)*
- d) Finally, ask: “And what good choices could the **consultants** make?”
  - (1) examples here might include:
    - (a) *“How would you feel about trying ABC?...”*
    - (b) *“What you’ve done in this part is very good. Now in this part, you might think about trying XYZ...”*
    - (c) *“We’ve struggled with this, too; it’s a hard problem, but here’s what we found is helpful...”*
    - (d) *“There are two specific steps I’d suggest, in this order...”*
- F. Now have the groups complete the other rounds, applying the tips and techniques from your discussion of what choices work and don’t work when we act as consultants and clients
  - 1. *When everyone is finished, it’s useful to ask if anyone tried one of the tips, or was more aware of her or his choices*
    - a) You will find that most people will say yes, and this gives you the chance to affirm their efforts in learning to do this better as they go along
- G. You can conclude with a brief discussion: “How did you feel about this process? What are its benefits?”
  - 1. *An example: if someone says that they didn’t get to a solution because most of the time was spent discussing what the problem is, you can point out that this is useful because it teaches us that we may have needed to first figure out the problem (see Einstein’s view, above), which is the essential first step in problem-solving*
  - 2. *In fact, sometimes participants will say, “Well, I’m not sure I got anything that I haven’t tried, but I definitely understood the problem better and that was very valuable because it will help us as we keep looking for a solution...”*

### III. TEACHING THIS TO STAFF AND CAMPERS

- A. How do you think we could use this process in other places or situations at camp?
- B. Please remember: Depending on age and ability level, campers and sometimes staff may benefit from a facilitator who can coach the group during each of the three steps. As with many life skills, it takes time and practice to become proficient at this important type of thinking, communication, and teamwork.