LEARNING A NON-VIOLENT
APPROACH TO TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

By
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Providing consulting for users seems to be one of the most difficult tasks faced by university computer centers. We are all aware of the problems associated with consulting: constant interruptions, users more interested in getting their program running than in understanding why it does not work, and programmers much more adept at communicating with machines than with people. Adding to these problems, the demands for assistance interfere with the systems-staff productivity.

To remedy this situation, a User Services staff is often created. Then, using the 'traditional approach' to Technical Assistance in an academic environment, it is staffed with people who have only the human skills as consultants. The professional systems people, meanwhile, are kept hidden in the basement, where they and the users can not come into contact. (The theory being that Systems Programmers have technical skills but not people-oriented skills. Often the two talents are thought to be mutually exclusive.)

This 'traditional approach' is not the way we, at the GWU Computer Center, believe technical assistance should be administered at an educational institution. University students have a right, (or at least at GWU, they certainly pay enough), to have access to the most knowledgeable people.

At GWU, we have rejected the notion that Systems Programmers can not deal with people, and we have kept the consulting function as part of systems' responsibility. In addition, we have maintained a consultant policy that we do not 'do' for users; we attempt to educate, to guide, and to teach, so that our users can eventually 'do' for themselves.

To aid our staff in meeting these objectives, we developed, in conjunction with the University Counseling Center, a structured workshop to teach programmers human-relation skills. This program has been successful over the past three years, because we have found that intelligent, technically oriented people respond well, when presented with consulting methods in a technical fashion.

Staff response to the workshops has been good -- surprisingly good. They have learned how to say NO without feeling guilty. They have learned to stick to their NO after they have said it, and to handle any resulting confrontations in a non-violent manner. They have also learned how to sound helpful and to avoid intimidating the user to the extent that he is afraid to come back and ask another question, (which will only compound Technical Assistance problems, not solve them). Learning to say NO when they are not on duty has let our staff feel free to move about the Computer Center halls and University campus without feeling hassled. Besides the benefits derived from the actual role playing, the staff has had fun and developed better rapport with each other. The workshops have provided an excellent opportunity for the staff to discuss the similar problems they were experiencing.

What we have done to aid our Technical Assistance staff in resolving conflicts with users could be useful to any staff providing consulting.

The following is a guideline for a program geared to help the Technical Assistance/Consulting staff improve human relation skills:

1. Advertise a workshop to help consultants with the problems they are having with users. (Figure 1)
2. Utilize a pre-workshop questionnaire. This involves each person and allows him to get something useful for himself into the workshop. (See Figures 2 and 3)
3. Make attendance mandatory.
4. Before the workshop, assign different staff members roles as a 'TA' or 'user'.
5. At the workshop, use video taped role playing to model a typical example before the group, and demonstrate one way to approach the problem.
6. Replay the vignette in parts, allowing 'TA' and 'user' to discuss their thoughts and feelings at key points in the filmed interaction. This sharing reveals to the group clues on how to intervene more effectively.
7. The counselor invites the group to comment on how the problem was being solved and what alternatives could be used. At times the counselor suggests alternatives and explains the behavioral principles which support these alternative ways to intervene.
8. The same 'TA-user' team or others can then role play another problem demonstrating the principles learned: empathic listening, understanding the problem before trying to solve it, and seeing barriers to the user's problem solving.
9. Some type of evaluation/follow up is done after the workshop.

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
INTERDEPARTMENTAL MEMORANDUM

DATE:

TO: Computer Center Staff

FROM: User Services

RE: Human Relations Workshop

Back by popular demand, Dr. David Celio, from the University Counseling Center, will hold an in-service training workshop for Computer Center personnel, dealing with conflicts encountered in our attempts to serve our student users. The workshop will be a sharing of problems in a group format. It is hoped that this workshop will improve our understanding of encountered conflicts in human terms.

To make the workshop most meaningful to you, you are asked to complete the attached form and return it by _____. You should be prepared to discuss the problem situations you have noted on the form. The group will comment on these problems and volunteers will be asked to role-play these situations so that we may analyze them. In short, the workshop will call upon you for active participation to become better acquainted with the principles of human relations.

Date, time and location of workshop will be announced.

FIGURE 1

Date, Time and Location of Workshop
To Be Announced

NAME Bob Griffith

JOB TITLE Supervisor

DUTIES Make sure things are going well

HOW LONG AT THIS POSITION? 2 yrs.

PROBLEM SITUATION YOU WANT TO DISCUSS everybody wants their work done yesterday and they lean on me to do it.

HOW DID YOU RESPOND TO THIS SITUATION? Upset stomach nagging cough, anxiety, and promise to do better in the future.

OTHER COMMENTS

Return This Form
By: , 1978
To:

FIGURE 3

Date, Time and Location of Workshop
To Be Announced

NAME Joel Crow

JOB TITLE Programmer

DUTIES Consulting with CAAC users

HOW LONG AT THIS POSITION? 2 months

PROBLEM SITUATION YOU WANT TO DISCUSS Situation where a user (usually a student) attempts to do something way beyond his ability or level of knowledge + pleads for me to provide more assistance than I should. or am willing to provide.

HOW DID YOU RESPOND TO THIS SITUATION? I usually end up doing more than I should - no consistent response

OTHER COMMENTS

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FIGURE 2