Cohort Groups
Bridgeline Call October 2008

The OCWTP training system has begun to sequentially schedule Caseworker Core training when possible. This change in scheduling has resulted in the evolvement of cohort groups. RTCs and trainers are challenged to consider the dynamics of cohort groups and their impact to the training system. Three theories support cohorts as potentially effective for adult learning; adult learning theory, group dynamics theory, and social psychology theory. For example, adult learning theory asserts that adult learning is facilitated when individuals are able to direct their own learning, when the learning is relevant, when learning taps into their experiences, and when they are able to build strong relationships with peers (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, and Norris, 2000).

According to group dynamics theory and social psychology cohorts become effective when members have similar expectations and commitments that facilitate cohesiveness and interdependence. Group members must have a sense of belonging and importance, and believe that their expertise and contributions are valued. In order to create effective cohorts it is also important to help the groups develop a sense of purpose; group activities must require mutual interaction and interdependence and learners must be able to evaluate their own learning (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, and Norris, 2000).

Benefits of Cohort Groups:

Cohort groups:
- Have a positive impact on learners' performance and motivation.
- Encourage the development of interpersonal relationships with peers.
- A common purpose which leads to collective sense of accomplishment.
- Contribute to the development of leadership skills.
- Improve the efficiency of training delivery.
- Provide better integration of course content and team teaching practices.
- Provide opportunity for bonding of groups which can lead to deeper discussions of sensitive issues.

Challenges of Cohort Groups:

- As relationships develop personal conflicts can emerge.
- Competition among group members can create tension.
- Some group members might have the tendency to dominate the group.
- Learners may become more demanding
- Learners are more likely to challenge conventional instructional approaches and relevance of content.

If cohorts are to evolve into a cohesive group, initial experiences as a cohort are critical in group development. Effective cohorts will balance the needs of the group with those of individual members by promoting a sense of belonging and creating an environment in which mutual respect exists. They will support risk taking, provide a place for critical reflection, and encourage and sustain multiple perspectives.

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Factors that limit the effectiveness of a cohort:
- Passive or dominant group members
- Changes in group membership
- Lack of commitment to the cohort
- Failure to meet group expectations
- Members viewing the instructor as the ultimate authority
- Independent learning styles that cannot adapt to group environments

Keys to successful cohort groups:

- Focus initial activities on developing collegial and interpersonal relationships.
- Model expectations for how the cohort will function.
- Balance group and individual development.
- The learning environment must both challenge and support the group members
- Prepare the group for potential tensions that might arise.

References

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