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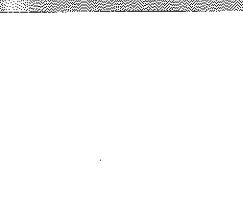
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Making Time For Excellence

By Terry O'Banion and Georgia Sims

INTRODUCTION

Emerging literature from the world of business documents that American businessmen are running their operations in new and creative ways. In books such as *Theory Z* and *In Search of Excellence*, authors are suggesting that organizations that encourage informality, flexibility, intensive communication, risk-taking, and value exploration are more efficient and effective than organizations that operate with traditional approaches. In their book, *In Search of Excellence*, Peters and Waterman suggest that the excellent companies seem to abound in distinctly individual techniques that counter the normal tendency toward conformity and inertia. They note that the excellent companies use a range of devices, especially in the areas of experimentation, management systems, and organizational fluidity -- devices that simplify the way they work. Important implications for organizing and administering educational institutions can be derived from these new approaches.

A common complaint of educational leaders is that there is not enough time to give attention to substantive activities. Every educator in the business has observed that there is not enough time for long-range planning, for creative thinking, or even to keep up with the daily grind. Educators generally resort to crisis management because their styles or the institutional structures do not allow time for considering the longer view.

To counter these and other problems, Chancellor Jan LeCroy of the Dallas County Community College District has placed "improving the quality of work life" as one of his highest priorities. A number of activities are beginning to emerge from this priority, and special attention is being given to providing opportunities for administrators in this large, complex, district to have time to explore and use their many talents.

The Dallas County Community College District consists of seven colleges and enrolls approximately 100,000 students each year. Twenty-five coun-

cils operate district-wide, with representatives from the colleges and the District administration, planning and giving direction to District activities. Councils report through a complex series of structures with recommendations coming to the Executive Council made up of the seven college presidents, five District officers, and three ex-officio members. Final recommendations are forwarded to the Board of Trustees for the District as appropriate. In short, the Dallas County Community College District is a bureaucracy, albeit one that operates quite effectively and efficiently for its size. Nevertheless, administrators in Dallas share with their colleagues across the country the constant complaint of not having enough time for the creative, planning, and catch-up processes.

At the Executive Council's retreat in the summer of 1982, a concept emerged from the frustrations and creativity of top administrators. The concept was dubbed "Wonderful Wednesday" and was implemented on a pilot basis during the 1982-1983 year.

"Wonderful Wednesday" is a simple, structural intervention designed to provide occasional relief for harried administrators. Two Wednesdays a month are designated "Wonderful Wednesday" and on those days no meetings or appointments are scheduled, and administrators agree not to call each other. On "Wonderful Wednesday" an administrator is free to schedule his or her time to think creatively, plan for long-range activities, read professional literature or catch up on paperwork. Administrators may work in their offices, in any other area of the institution, in local libraries, or at home. The only requirement is that a secretary must be able to reach the administrator in case of an emergency.

During the 1982-1983 academic year, 23 "Wonderful Wednesdays" were observed. All college and District administrators, including classified supervisors, throughout the system were encouraged to participate. The range of participation included physical plant directors, division chairs, LRC asso-

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ciate deans, student development directors, vice-presidents, presidents, and the chancellor. Some colleges participated more than others. Even though participation was not uniform across the District, "Wonderful Wednesday" has had considerable impact on slowing down the bureaucracy and providing opportunities for administrators to be more creative, to plan, and to catch up on piles of paperwork.

CRITIQUE FROM PARTICIPANTS

In early 1983, the Office of Educational Affairs conducted an evaluation of "Wonderful Wednesday," which had been scheduled 13 times at the point of evaluation. Surveys were distributed to 257 administrators; 193 surveys were returned for a response rate of 75 percent. Of the 193 returns, 126 respondents or 65 percent indicated they had actually participated in "Wonderful Wednesday." The following data are based on these 126 responses.

Of the 126 participants only six participated in all 13 "Wonderful Wednesdays," but 28 (23 percent) participated in 10 or more. The mean number of "Wonderful Wednesdays" for the 126 respondents was six days. Several respondents indicated that scheduling "Wonderful Wednesday" before the academic year begins will increase participation.

There were four activities listed as being appropriate for "Wonderful Wednesday": professional reading, creative thinking, long-range planning, and catching up on paperwork. The respondents were asked to rank each activity in order of the amount of time spent. Catching up on paperwork ranked first, while long-range planning ranked second. Creative thinking and professional reading ranked third and fourth, respectively. As one administrator indicated, "I do professional reading on my own time and feel uncomfortable taking District's time to do this."

In response to the question, "Regardless of your participation in Wonderful Wednesday, how do you rate its value?" 121 (63 percent) of the 193 total respondents rated "Wonderful Wednesday" as having "high value" or "very high value." As one administrator commented, "When I spend some time reflecting, I do a better job overall." Another administrator declared:

Despite the fact that I frequently have been unable to observe Wonderful Wednesday due to work load, I am overwhelmingly influenced by the positive intention of such as an option for administrators. This entire concept has made such an uplifting impression on my

morale and feelings of professionalism that I feel certain that the DCCCD benefits from even more hours of overtime than I usually devote to my work. I have derived a sense of pride in being part of an organization that would entrust me with time to grow professionally and improve my effectiveness. Thanks for this opportunity.

Of the 126 persons who participated in Wonderful Wednesday, 90 (72 percent) reported "some improvement" or "great improvement" in the quality of their work that may be attributable in part to the time set aside for "Wonderful Wednesday." In the same vein, 86 persons (69 percent) reported "some increase" or "great increase" in the quantity of work they had produced that may be attributable in part to the time set aside for "Wonderful Wednesday." One administrator indicated, "It was difficult for me at first until I built it into my time table. I can see the results now. My time for planning has visibly increased my shop's productivity and done wonders for my stress factor!"

When asked if "Wonderful Wednesday" had a positive effect on morale, 111 persons (88 percent) responded that "Wonderful Wednesday" had a positive effect to "some extent" or to a "large extent." As one administrator expressed it, "The idea is great and quite a morale booster. I have been so accustomed to being on constant alert. To have a day free from any calls or appointments would probably drive me crazy. One of these days I will adapt. It is nice to know that the option is available. Thanks!!"

There were few negative comments about the benefits to be derived from the concept. But one administrator did observe, "I see no benefit to be gained and suggest it is more likely to be abused than effectively used."

Fifty-four respondents (43 percent) indicated that meetings, telephone calls, or other routine business encroached on their "Wonderful Wednesdays." Eighteen respondents (15 percent) indicated that the observance of "Wonderful Wednesday" interfered at least sometimes with District business they needed to conduct with persons outside the District, while 47 respondents (38 percent) indicated that the observance of "Wonderful Wednesday" interfered at least sometimes with District business they needed to conduct with persons inside the District.

Corroborating these responses, several of the written comments reflected the administrators' concern for being available to staff and students. As one administrator observed, "Daily activities must continue with regard to first line supervi-

sion." And as one division chairperson indicated, "It is difficult for a division chairman to be responsive to the daily crisis situations of faculty and students and still maintain the Wonderful Wednesday concept."

Ninety-seven percent of the respondents indicated they would like to see "Wonderful Wednesday" continued. Approximately 40 percent of the 97 percent responding positively, however, indicated they would like some changes in the concept. The Dallas County Community Colleges are studying the suggestions to improve the process, and colleges that would like to experiment with the concept should take into consideration the critiques noted in the following section.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

If the concept is to succeed, top administrators must encourage staff to observe "Wonderful Wednesday." In tight bureaucracies many staff do not feel comfortable having unscheduled time to meet their own goals, and they need to be given permission. Furthermore, top administrators need to model for their staff their own commitment to the concept by using the day for their own purposes.

Related to the need for encouragement and observation of "Wonderful Wednesday" by top administrators is the problem of limited participation. If only a few managers in a college or a district participate, the concept will probably not work. Those who do not participate will infringe upon the time of those who wish to participate. As one staff member observed, "I think the concept is good and that it can work to our advantage. However, without greater respect for each other's Wonderful Wednesdays, the frustrations experienced greatly dampen positive gains."

The original concept of "Wonderful Wednesday" dictated that no meetings be scheduled. A number of participants in the evaluation suggested, however, that the "Wonderful Wednesday" could be used for organized activities if the participants agreed. There were numerous suggestions regarding using the Wednesdays for special staff development activities across the District or on-campus or special group long-range planning and creative think-

ing exercises. It probably is best to give staff members in various locations the option of organizing opportunities to meet when this is agreed upon by the work group.

Several respondents suggested that the day for these activities be set aside on Friday, "Fabulous Friday," since Friday is usually a slower day than Wednesday. The original group considering the concept discussed using Friday, but members were concerned that Friday would be too tempting a day to slough off in the afternoon. The TGIF ("Thank God It's Friday") syndrome is already at work in terms of making Friday less productive than other days.

It is most important that the rationale and value for "Wonderful Wednesday" be communicated clearly to faculty and classified staff. They need to understand the concept so they will not resent administrators who participate.

From the beginning, there have been attempts to develop a name better suited to the experience than "Wonderful Wednesday." Several respondents pointed out that the designation sounds frivolous and could cause trouble with the community and with faculty and classified staff who are not participating. To date, no one has been able to suggest a better substitute, and it appears that the designation "Wonderful Wednesday" will stick for the Dallas County Community Colleges.

CONCLUSION

On a first-year pilot basis, the "Wonderful Wednesday" concept certainly seems to have some value for busy administrators. It provides an opportunity for administrators to slow down and take stock of a highly complex system that is time-driven. Although no hard evidence exists at the moment, it is clear to top administrators in the Dallas District that "Wonderful Wednesday" does provide good opportunities for long-range planning, professional development, creative thinking, and catching up on paperwork. When "Wonderful Wednesday" is part of a general philosophy regarding improving the "quality of work life," it can have a considerable impact on making colleges work better.

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