Research Center for Leadership in Action
NYU Wagner

PRACTICE NOTE

February 2010

Peer Consultations: Developing Reflective Leadership by Giving and Getting Expert Advice

In this Practice Note...

In this Practice Note, we focus on peer consultations as a particular approach to facilitating peer learning.

Peer consultations allow individuals to bring leadership challenges or dilemmas to "workshop" with a learning group. A participant frames a challenge and gets advice and ideas for new strategies from the rest of the group based on their professional expertise. At the same time group members can also gain new insights into similar challenges they may face in their own work.

This method is most appropriate for a group that has a shared professional orientation either in terms of their functional role (e.g. development directors, HR professionals, or community organizers) or the substance of their work (e.g. healthcare, education, or local government), so they have some common experience and language with which to work.

Introduction

One of the core principles of RCLA's leadership development practice is the value of peer-to-peer learning (peer learning for short). Experienced practitioners come to development opportunities with a wealth of knowledge and expertise that can be tapped in the service of the whole group's learning, and peer learning technologies make that possible.

There are multiple approaches to supporting peer learning. RCLA employs many of them, including learning journeys (see our Practice Note on Designing Peer-to-Peer Learning Exchanges), collaborative inquiry in which a group of people come together to explore a question of burning interest to them in their practice through cycles of action and reflection (see RCLA's CI reports), and shorter exercises like "speed dating" in which people are paired around a "give and get" knowledge exchange (Rapid Peer-to-Peer Resource Exchange).

In this Practice Note, we focus on peer consultations as a particular approach to facilitating peer learning. Peer consultations allow individuals within a learning group to bring leadership challenges or dilemmas to "workshop" with the group. Through a structured and facilitated process, an individual participant frames a challenge and seeks advice from the rest of the group based on their professional experience and expertise. The presenter gets new insights into his or her challenge and often walks away with specific new strategies to test. At the same time, the rest of the group practices advice-giving – an important leadership skill – and often also gains new insights into similar challenges they may face in their own work.

RCLA Practice Notes offer practical guidance about sound leadership practices by drawing on leaders' experiences using various techniques, tools, and approaches in dealing with critical social issues. More information is available at www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership

The Experience

Peer consultations can be done with diverse kinds of groups and with varied learning and/or development objectives in mind. The audience and those objectives call for different structures and corresponding forms of facilitation. To illustrate the range of options available, this Practice Note highlights three specific and very different engagements in which RCLA structured and facilitated peer consultations.

In the first engagement, RCLA was called upon by a new foundation that supports fellowships for leaders working on cross-systems change in the fields of juvenile justice, child welfare and education to conduct a reflective analysis of their emerging fellowship model and to support the development of a peer-based component to the fellowship experience. To achieve the second goal, RCLA organized a three-part series of three-hour sessions with the fellows in which peer consultations were the primary activity. We will refer to this engagement throughout this Practice Note as the fellowship.

The second example comes from a collaborative endeavor between RCLA; Korn Consulting, a consulting group focused on executive development, team effectiveness, organizational change, and strategies to drive growth; and On-Ramps, a full-service search firm that helps organizations recruit the best talent available for full-time, part-time, and project-based work arrangements. These three organizations came together around a shared interest in working with talent managers at high-performing nonprofits. We worked together to organize a one-day peer learning event in which each participant had the opportunity to raise a question or issue of particular concern to them in their own practice and from which everyone could learn. It must be noted that Rich Korn of Korn Consulting was in the lead on the structuring and facilitation of this event, so reflections on this work are made based on observation and credit goes to Rich Korn for the approach described. We will refer to this engagement as the talent manager event.

Finally, we highlight a session for student leaders at NYU Wagner as part of the Wagner Leadership Academy RCLA manages. In this half-day session, participants brought a leadership challenge they had identified in their role as student leaders to a highly structured peer consultation process in which other students collectively made sense of their challenge. The primary objective was to provide the presenting student with new insight into his or her dilemma. We will refer to this engagement as the Wagner Leadership Academy (WLA).

In the following sections, we describe in detail the different approaches to peer consultations taken in these three examples and focus specifically on the type of preparation that goes into making a successful consultation event, the different options for structuring and facilitating the consultations depending on the audience and learning objectives, and finally the outcomes the consultations produced.

Preparation

While one could spontaneously engage in a peer consultation exercise – for example as part of a staff meeting or working session – this is probably best reserved for groups that have a deep working relationship and are highly facile at asking for and giving advice. In any case in which a peer consultation is planned as part of a formal leadership program, proper preparation must be done.

There are at least four key questions to consider when preparing for a peer consultation session:

1. What are the core learning and/or development objectives for the consultation session?
2. How will the presenter be prepared to effectively communicate his or her dilemma to the group in such a way that they can productively engage in a consultation?
3. Does the rest of the group need to review any background material to effectively take up their role in the consultation process?
4. How will the session be focused, structured and facilitated to ensure learning for the whole group not just the presenter?

The primary organizer and/or facilitator is generally the person responsible for resolving these questions, but it can be useful to bring a participant into the conversation to ensure that the session is designed to meet his or her expectations. For example, in the case of the WLA, RCLA brought together a planning committee that included RCLA facilitators, NYU Wagner administrators and student leaders. The student leaders were particularly helpful in clarifying how much we could expect students to prepare for the session and what kind of structure would feel most productive to them in the session itself.

After clarifying the responses to the four questions above, the facilitator may assign some pre-work to the participants. Pre-work can come in many forms, but it must help the presenter identify and frame his or her dilemma for consultation. The National School Reform Faculty suggests four questions for consideration in preparing a dilemma for consultation:

1. Is it something that is bothering you enough that your thoughts regularly return to the dilemma?
2. Is it a dilemma that is not already on its way to being solved?
3. Can you affect the dilemma by changing your practice?
4. Is it something that is important to you and that you are willing to work on?

Returning to the three examples from RCLA's practice illustrates the possible range of pre-work assignments. If the learning goal is to provide participants with practice in giving and getting advice and some new insights into the leadership challenges they face, pre-work can be as simple as sending an e-mail to participants asking them to reflect on a particular challenge they would like to bring to the group for consultation. This was the nature of the pre-work RCLA used for the WLA. Alternatively, if there are more ambitious learning goals focused on significantly building leadership capacity and providing participants with effective strategies to address their leadership challenges, more in-depth preparation is required.

In the case of the fellowship, the RCLA facilitators asked each participant to prepare a project briefing paper to be circulated among the whole group of fellows prior to the day on which she or he was to present. Specifically, the briefing paper was supposed to be no longer than two pages and include:

1. *Overview of the project* – describe the project, importance to the field and impact you anticipate.
2. *Work to date* – what milestones have been set, what have you accomplished, what has proved challenging.
3. *Learning to date* - as you have worked to move the project forward identify one or two things you have learned from this experience that you believe will be helpful to the group.
4. *Question for group engagement* – at this point in the process what question, dilemma or challenge would you like to invite the group to help you think about?

In this way the presenter was prepared to ask for advice in productive ways and the other participants were able to enter the consultation already grounded in the presenter's work. This approach is helpful when one of the goals of the consultation is to deepen the connections among the participants because it allows them to get to know one another's work prior to entering the session. It may not be necessary for a group that already knows each other's work very well.

Another alternative is to conduct one-on-one conversations with the participants to help them identify and sharpen an issue or question for consultation. This approach allows the facilitator more influence over how the presenter shapes his or her issue and is best used when the learning of the whole group is as important or perhaps more important than the new strategies the individual presenter receives. This was the approach taken with the talent manager event. Each participant had a prep call with one of the session organizers to discuss the topics she or he would most like to see covered at the session. The organizer also asked the participants more about one or two areas he or she was grappling with most in his or her own work, as well as areas where he or she was particularly successful. This session was not as focused on getting participants more deeply connected with one another, so it was unnecessary to circulate briefs prior to the session.

These examples illustrate the different types of pre-work that are helpful to assign in advance of a peer consultation session. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list but rather a menu of options. The pre-work can take many forms so long as it helps the presenter clarify his or her dilemma prior to the session and provides the facilitator with enough information to enter the session prepared to provide supportive facilitation.

Consultation Pre-work based on the Objectives		
Program: Wagner Leadership Academy	**Program: Talent Development Program**	**Program: Fellowship**
Primary objective: Give each presenter insights into their leadership dilemma **Secondary objective:** Give student leaders practice giving and getting advice	**Primary objective:** Enable learning about issues relevant to all group members **Secondary objective:** Offer opportunities for participants to get advice on issues they are grappling with and to give advice based on best practices	**Primary objective:** Give each presenter insights into their leadership dilemma **Secondary objective:** Deepen connections among fellows for the long-term.
Consideration: Participants are already familiar with each other's work.	**Consideration:** Learning for the group members as a whole is as important as for any individual	**Consideration:** Participants may not be familiar with each other's work but want to form long-term connections and establish a learning agenda together.
Pre-work: Planning committee clarified expectations and structure; facilitators emailed participants to reflect on a leadership challenge to discuss at the consultation	**Pre-work:** Facilitators conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant to identify topics of interest, their challenges and what they were doing well (to share these practices with others); topics were then grouped into seven clusters with broad relevance	**Pre-work:** Each participant wrote a project briefing summary, which was distributed to the facilitator and group on the day before s/he presented.

Structure and Facilitation

As with the pre-work, the structure and facilitation of a peer consultation session can vary and are dependent on the audience and learning objectives. We describe these variations below using the same three examples from RCLA's work. First, though, it is worth noting a few constants regardless of the structure chosen:

- Timing – all consultations must be set to clear time parameters, so every participant is offered an equal chance to serve as both presenter and consultant. Keeping time can be the facilitator's job, but it can also belong to one of the participants.

- Presentation – the consultation always needs to begin with a clear articulation of the dilemma, issue, or question for discussion. The presenter should be kept to a brief time period and should include enough background to ground the dilemma.

- Questions – participants should always be given a chance to ask questions of the presenter. There should be a clear distinction made between clarifying questions – those that ask about the facts of the situation – and probing questions – those that get at the underlying issues, assumptions or possible solutions. The facilitator should attend to moments when advice comes disguised as questions and be sure to put a boundary between question time and consultation time.

- Facilitator – the facilitator can be an outsider who provides instructions and support from the front of the group, or the role can be rotated among participants. However, there must always be a facilitator who attends to the process of the consultation separately from the content.

- Response – depending on the structure, the presenter may be involved in the consultation discussion or he or she may be an observer during the discussion; in either case, the presenter must be given some opportunity for response at the close of the session.

As mentioned at the outset, the three examples we are highlighting here were structured and facilitated in very different ways. In the fellowship example, we were focused on providing the participants with a deep understanding of one another's work while offering the presenter an opportunity to get sound advice and effective strategies from his or her peers to address a particular challenge in his or her own work. Consequently, we structured the consultation sessions in a relatively loose way such that an organic conversation could emerge. This structure required skilled but light touch facilitation from two experienced facilitators who helped the group stay on task while also giving them room to explore resonant issues in the moment. Each round began with a five-minute presentation based on the briefing paper that had been circulated prior to the session. The other fellows then had about three minutes to ask clarifying questions. The group then discussed the dilemma, offering strategies that had worked in their context, for approximately 20 minutes. At the end of each round, the group identified key themes that came up in the consultation that they wanted to track for future learning. This final activity was driven by the overarching purpose of the sessions as a mechanism for launching and piloting a peer-based learning component for the fellowship experience as a whole. After all the consultations, we were able to collectively produce a learning agenda based on those themes for future work as a peer group.

The WLA was structured in a similar manner but with clearer instructions and tighter timing. Each consultation included a two-minute presentation of the leadership challenge followed by three minutes for clarifying questions. Then, the presenter was instructed to move his or her seat back just a few inches from the table and to listen to the other students discuss his or her dilemma for ten minutes. Guiding questions for this discussion included: What did we hear? What assumptions seem to be operating? What do we think of the challenge? Finally, the presenter had three minutes to reflect back to the group what she or he was taking away from the conversation.

Because this was a younger group of people who already knew each other's work better than the fellows did in the example above, it wasn't as necessary to provide as much detail on each presenter's work. In addition, while this was one session within a longer series, the consultations were not designed to help the group develop its learning agenda. Another key difference was that the whole group was divided into smaller groups of four students each for the purpose of the consultations, and these small groups were self-facilitated once the lead facilitator gave instructions to the whole group. When small groups are self-facilitating it is particularly helpful to be very clear on the timing, tasks and flow of the consultation and to provide those instructions in written format whether on a handout at the table or on a chart at the front of the room. We have included the protocol handout from the WLA in the appendix of this note.

The talent managers' event had a very different purpose from these first two examples in that it was focused on identifying the key issues talent managers were grappling with and then covering them in as much depth as possible in the course of a full-day session. This event was not billed as a peer consultation session and did not include an explicit consultancy protocol. Instead, it was described as an opportunity to come together with peers and learn from one another effective strategies for addressing the most pressing talent-related issues facing their organizations.

After conducting the prep calls with each participant, the agenda was shaped around seven broad areas: culture, communications, motivating and retaining staff in a cost-contained environment, professional development, succession planning, performance management, and diversity. Strong facilitation was provided throughout the day by a single, highly experienced facilitator who could both manage the process and provide substantive insight and expertise to each of the areas covered. Under each broad area, at least one and up to four participants presented a brief description of the challenge they faced related to the particular area being covered at that moment. The facilitator then invited feedback and suggested strategies from the other participants in the room. In cases where the prep call had shown that a particular participant was successful in a given area, he would call upon that individual to comment. Over the course of the day every participant had at least one challenge addressed and was able to provide successful strategies from his or her own work to help at least one other participant.

It is important to reiterate here that this format relied both on peer consultation and expert consultation from the facilitator and could not have been successful without a facilitator who had specific content expertise to contribute. In addition, it could not have been as successful without the in-depth prep calls to identify each individual's challenge areas and success areas that he or she would contribute throughout the day.

Consultation Structure Based on the Objectives		
Program: Wagner Leadership Academy	Program: Talent Development Program	Program: Fellowship
Primary objective: Give each presenter insights into their leadership dilemma **Secondary objective:** Give student participants practice giving and getting advice	**Primary objective:** Enable learning about issues relevant to all group members **Secondary objective:** Offer opportunities for participants to get advice on issues they are grappling with and to give advice based on best practices	**Primary objective:** Give each presenter insights into their leadership dilemma **Secondary objective:** Deepen connections among fellows for the long-term.
Consideration: Participants are not experienced facilitators.	**Consideration:** Facilitators are experts in both consultation and subject matter.	**Consideration:** Participants may not be familiar with each other's work but want to form long-term connections and establish a learning agenda together.
Structure: Small groups with all participants taking turns in a presenting role during 1.5 hour session; highly structured protocol including timed presentations, time for clarifying questions, and discussion of the dilemma in which presenter is observer	**Structure:** Single group with all participants serving in presenting role over the course of one-day session; agenda organized by topic rather than individual; focus on sharing effective practices in response to each presenting question or issue	**Structure:** Single group with all participants serving in presenting role over the course of three sessions; timed presentations; questions and discussion with presenter as an active participant following a loose protocol; focus on identifying themes across consultations for further collective learning
Facilitation: Initial instructions given by primary facilitator; small groups self-facilitate consultations	**Facilitation:** Facilitation focused on both on process and interjecting relevant expertise	**Facilitation:** Light touch focused on process and tracking themes for future learning agenda

Outcomes

Because these three examples started with different learning objectives, it follows that they produced different outcomes at the end. The structure and facilitation method chosen for each session contributed to those divergent outcomes. However, there are several general outcomes that are consistent across all successful peer consultations:

- Network building – peer consultations allow members of a group to deepen their bonds with one another. This can involve introducing participants who have never worked together and therefore expanding their professional networks, as was the case with the talent managers event, or it can lead to deep and lasting relationships in which participants gain a foundation for supporting one another in their work over the long term, as was the case with the fellowship.

- Leadership skills – in the increasingly interdependent and complex environment in which we work simultaneous reflection on one's own challenge and providing useful consultation to peers represent core leadership skills. Reflection is successful when a challenge is framed in such a way that invites productive advice from peers. All peer consultations offer the opportunity to practice these skills. Those consultations that are highly structured and supported by explicit instructions, such as the WLA, can help emerging leaders learn these skills for the first time.

- Tacit to explicit knowledge – in addition to practicing the leadership skills described above, the act of asking for and giving advice can help participants begin to make explicit some of their more tacit knowledge about how they approach their work. By sharing strategies that have been effective in such a way that others can understand them and apply them to their own work, participants may articulate their leadership practices for the first time. The talent managers' event took this process one step further by compiling a report of all the challenges and suggested strategies that had been shared and then circulating it back to the participants. Seeing one's articulation of a leadership practice in writing can make it even more concrete for the leader.

- New insight and strategies – perhaps the most direct result of peer consultations is that participants – both presenters and peers – gain new insights into the challenges they face and new strategies to try when they get back to their work. In the case of a single event such as the talent managers' event, this can be a productive opportunity to step back from one's work and come back re-energized and armed with new approaches to try. In the case of an on-going learning community like the fellowship or the WLA, participants have the added benefit of continuing to be in dialogue about their challenges after they go back and try the strategies they gained from the consultation.

Conclusion

Based on RCLA's diverse experience structuring and facilitating peer consultations, they are a highly effective approach to peer-learning and leadership development. Further, they are very popular with participants. Experienced practitioners long to be in dialogue with one another about the specific challenges they face. Offering them a safe and supportive environment in which to have that dialogue can be a valuable gift.

Appendix A: Diverse Approaches to Peer Consultations

The following table summarizes the different approaches taken in the three peer consultation engagements described in this practice note.

	Fellowship	Talent Managers	WLA
Audience	8 mid-career leaders with shared systems focus and diverse approaches who knew each other but did not work together regularly	10 senior talent managers from high performing nonprofits many of whom did not know each other prior to the session	14 graduate student leaders from NYU Wagner who knew and worked together running the school's student groups
Pre-work	Project briefs with key questions for consultation prepared by the presenters, sent to the facilitator and circulated among all participants prior to the session	One-on-one calls between representatives of the convening groups and individual participants to identify the themes for discussion	Identification of a leadership challenge for presentation
Structure	Single group with all participants serving in presenting role over the course of three sessions; timed presentations; questions and discussion with presenter as an active participant following a loose protocol; focus on identifying themes across consultations for further collective learning	Single group with all participants serving in presenting role over the course of one-day session; agenda organized by topic rather than individual; focus on sharing effective practices in response to each presenting question or issue	Small groups with all participants serving in presenting role during 1.5 hour session within a larger agenda; highly structured protocol including timed presentations, time for clarifying questions, and discussion of the dilemma in which presenter is observer
Facilitation	Light touch focused on process and tracking themes	Strong facilitation focused on also interjecting relevant expertise	Initial instructions given by primary facilitator; small groups self-facilitate consultations
Outcomes	Increased bonds among fellows; shared sense of common areas for future learning; knowledge transfer; new insights and strategies for presenters	Expansion of personal networks; knowledge transfer; new strategies for addressing areas of concern for presenters	Increased bonds among students; new ideas for addressing leadership challenges; skill at asking for and giving advice

Appendix B: Wagner Leadership Academy Peer Consultancy Protocol

Adapted from "Consultancy Protocol" produced by the National School Reform Faculty
http://www.nsrfharmony.org/protocols.html

Timeline

Introduction	5 minutes
First dilemma	2 minutes
Clarifying questions from the group	5 minutes
Group discussion of dilemma	10 minutes
Presenter reflects on conversation	3 minutes
Three subsequent presenters	60 minutes

Total Activity Time: 85 minutes

Steps

1. The presenter gives an overview of the challenge with which s/he is struggling, and frames a question for the group to consider. The framing of this question, as well as the quality of the presenter's reflection on the dilemma being discussed, are key features of this protocol. The focus of the group's conversation is on the challenge.
2. The group asks clarifying questions of the presenter – that is, questions that have brief, factual answers.
3. The group talks with each other about the challenge presented.
4. Members of the group sometimes suggest actions the presenter might consider taking. Most often, however, they work to define the issues more thoroughly and objectively. The presenter doesn't speak during this discussion, but instead listens and takes notes.
5. Possible questions to frame the discussion:
    a. What did we hear?
    b. What didn't we hear that they think might be relevant?
    c. What assumptions seem to be operating?
    d. What questions does the challenge raise for us?
    e. What do we think about the challenge?
    f. What might we do or try if faced with a similar challenge? What have we done in similar situations?
6. The presenter reflects on what s/he heard and on what s/he is now thinking, sharing with the group anything that particularly resonated during the discussion.

Resource on Peer Consultations

"Consultancy Protocol" from the National School Reform Faculty offers a variety of facilitation tools.
http://www.nsrfharmony.org/protocols.html

Relevant RCLA Resources

Practice Note: Rapid Peer-to-Peer Resource Exchange (Speed-dating)
This Practice Note explains how to prepare and facilitate session in which leaders can exchange knowledge and resources with peers in under 90 minutes.
http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/reports/files/PracticeNoteSpeedDating1208.pdf

Practice Note: Designing Peer-to-Peer Learning Exchanges
This Practice Note discusses how to facilitate opportunities for valuable peer-to-peer learning and to address the challenge of applying the learning "back home" in participants' own organizations.
http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/reports/files/PracticeNotePeer-to-PeerExchange1207.pdf

Cooperative Inquiry Reports
These reports share the findings of small groups engaged in cycles of action and reflection together around a question of common interest.
http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/change/research_products.php

Related Resources

Korn Consulting
http://www.kornconsulting.com/

On-Ramps
http://www.on-ramps.com/

RCLA's work with NYU Wagner students
http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/our_work/wagner_students.php

Research Center for Leadership in Action
NYUWagner

The Research Center for Leadership in Action is committed to advancing breakthrough scholarship on leadership for the public good and developing a deep and diverse pool of public service leaders through customized, experiential programs that both expand individuals' skills and strengthen the organizations in which they work. As a leadership center at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, RCLA conducts rigorous social science research, employing a variety of innovative and participatory methodologies to the issues of contemporary leadership.