



Applying the ALUo by Glenn Wilson

While a student in the Masters' Degree Program in Creativity at the Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State College, I was presented an opportunity to work inside of an office facility. A letter from the office manager vaguely described a situation in which she thought we might be of some help. Great! An opportunity to apply! The next day, I scheduled a meeting with the manager to better understand the situation surrounding the context and the need for a possible intervention.

The situation as explained by the manager was a need to increase productivity. The lack of problem-solving skills was cited by the office manager as a major barrier to productivity. A tour of the facilities followed. From that tour I got a clear sense of the concerns. The facility was a branch office of a large northeastern U.S. medical assessment organization in which the employees (operators) entered data from assessment worksheets (approximately 40 pages each) into "units" (electronic worksheets) on a computer. Once completed, these units were printed and sent to the customer as a final product. It was mandatory that each unit be 100% error free, 100% of the time, out the door within the day, and a high unit production quota be matched or surpassed.

To specifically address the need for problem solving skills, Scott Robinson (a colleague of mine) and I began to instruct our teams in the use of Creative Problem Solving (CPS). During one of the early debrief sessions, an operator asked me a great question: "Why are we taking the time to learn how to identify our problems and come up with ideas when we know our ideas will never be listened to?" Now, I for one love great questions (one's I can't answer) and this was a zinger. As the discussion with our teams continued, we learned that the operators continually submitted ideas to management with no response! Not one operator in the entire group, that had turned in a suggestion or idea to the office manager, ever got a reply. The ideas just seemed to disappear. An "idea cemetery," I thought. I assured them that I would talk to the office manager about this matter.

When I questioned the office manager about the situation, she agreed that she did not provide feedback to the employees about their ideas. She stated that most ideas submitted were too lengthy and/or did not provide her with the necessary information she needed to make decisions. Her time was limited for such matters as she was managing two offices in the same district. When I asked her if she would support a system that would simultaneously make efficient use of her time and provide the information necessary for making decisions, she agreed that she would.

After clarifying the manager's needs, I went to work on a new suggestion system for the office. The "system," to be successful, needed to do two things: (1) provide the office manager with a simple, effective, and efficient way to look at a new idea or suggestion; and (2) provide constructive, written feedback,

presented in a way that encouraged further development on the idea or suggestion.

To address these issues, I developed a two part system utilizing Advantages, Limitations, Unique Qualities, and Overcoming Limitations (ALUo)(Isaksen & Treffinger, 1985) and a complementary worksheet. When using the ALUo, the "advantages" of the idea or suggestion are presented first. This helps to identify the strong points and the positive aspects of the new idea or suggestion. Next, the "limitations" of the idea or suggestion are presented. The limitations help to identify the concerns or weak points in the new idea or suggestion. These limitations should always be stated using the stems: "How to...", "How might...", or "In what ways might...". By turning the limitations into questions (problem statements) they can be overcome and developed through idea generation. The third step is looking at the "unique qualities" of the idea. Identifying these qualities preserves the elements of novelty in the option that are useful and valuable. The fourth step is "overcoming the limitations" identified earlier. To be even more productive, the limitations can be ranked from "most important" to "least important." When the "most important" limitations have been overcome, many of the remaining limitations tend to disappear.

The benefits of using an ALUo in this situation, provided the operators and the office manager a pathway for communication by providing: a portable and flexible framework by which to present an idea or suggestion to management; a process for feedback which kept the idea or suggestion open and therefore in the hands of the person who was in a position to move it forward; and a process for positive feedback from management to the presenter showing that the idea or suggestion had indeed been reviewed.

Although the ALUo by itself is a powerful tool, the office manager required additional data to help her make decisions. To address this concern, I developed an additional worksheet (to be used in conjunction with the ALUo) to identify the "relative advantages" (Rogers, 1983) of the idea or suggestion being presented. Relative advantage is the advantage your idea, if implemented, will provide over the "old" idea. In this situation, the office manager identified time, cost, and acceptability as important factors that she needed to help make a decision on the ideas or suggestions presented.

Once developed, the two part suggestion system was presented to the office manager for approval. She approved the system, and promised to support it by providing feedback to the operators using the ALUo format, and to return each idea or suggestion within a one-week time period. She also mandated that only ideas and suggestions using this new system would be recognized.

Upon follow-up with the organization, the operators informed us that over five ideas and suggestions had been presented to date and that two of them had already been approved for implementation (one dealing with having the software program modified, and the other dealing with computer hardware). That was two more ideas in a 12 week time frame than for all of last year! The office manager

informed us that she implemented the ALUo based suggestion system in her other district office and had set up a recognition/reward system for ideas/suggestions approved for use. I made an additional inquiry into the continued use of the suggestion system six weeks after Scott and I left the organization. The office manager had been promoted to a new job and was gone. The ALUo based suggestion system remained!!!!

References:

Isaksen, S. G. & Treffinger, D. J. (1985). Creative problem solving: The basic course. Buffalo, NY: Bearly Limited.

Rogers, E. M. (1983). Diffusion of innovations (3rd ed.). New York: Free Press.

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