



Good Grief: The Developmental Stages of Assessment Acceptance

NASPA

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June 27, 2007

From NASPA's NetResults

As my fourth year as a full-time assessment practitioner approaches, I am starting to recognize a modus operandi during my interactions with others regarding assessment. Lest student affairs professionals feel singled out, I must add the caveat that the stages I will put forth in this article do not apply solely to student affairs professionals. Prior to becoming a director of evaluation and research in student affairs, I served in an institutional effectiveness role where I coordinated academic assessment. Truth be told, the majority of my evaluation and assessment experience has been shaped by faculty interaction. Therefore, this article addresses behaviors across all areas of academe.

While I was talking to and comparing stories with colleagues at a recent assessment conference, I had an epiphany. After several conversations, it occurred to me that my colleagues and I witness very similar behavior patterns among fellow faculty and staff on our different campuses when approached with the topic of evaluation or assessment. Not only were reactions similar in nature, but also they seemed related to what phase "building the assessment culture" our individual campuses were in. The less entrenched the assessment culture, the more passionate the reaction. As I contemplated this further, a certain clarity emerged. What we were witnessing on our current campuses and campuses past, paralleled the stages in which one might engage when resolving serious personal crises and upheaval. Had I recognized this archetype earlier in my career, it might have precluded several crises of my own!

It is for this purpose and vein of humor that I write this. I hope to alert those new to the field of evaluation and assessment to be vigilant and watchful for the stages of assessment acceptance on their campuses. Perhaps I can also liberate those more seasoned colleagues currently floundering in a sea of developmental stalemates by offering a new framework of understanding.

Faculty and staff will exhibit unique behaviors and characteristics at each juncture. I have supplied examples of what one might observe or hear. I have also included suggestions on ways assessment staff can facilitate growth and movement toward a more advanced stage. Albeit unusual, it is possible for unwilling participants to regress. For example, a staff member may advance into stage 4 (frustration and bargaining) but may be unable resolve the dilemma successfully. In all likelihood, stage 3 (denial) may be revisited. With apologies to Kübler-Ross (1969) and Erikson (1950), let's discuss the developmental stages of assessment acceptance.

Stage 1: **Veritable Paradise (relative to what is coming).**

It is into this calm that the assessment bombshell will burst. It may begin as a result of findings from a program review committee or a request from your office for a copy of the annual assessment plan. An impending accreditation visit could be responsible for initiating the end of paradise. Whatever the explanation, keep lines of communication and dialogue open. Begin by ascertaining the level of understanding and familiarity with assessment and evaluation within the division. Knowledge of your constituents' skills and abilities will aid you in devising a strategy tailored to their needs. Initial discussions should emphasize the ultimate purpose of assessment which is to improve programs and services for our students. Although it is necessary for faculty and staff to be aware of the internal and external pressures that are shaping assessment, focusing on the best way to determine if we have an impact on student learning and development is through assessment.

Stage 2: **Shock and/or Paralysis.**

Once the bad news that "Susie really liked the course" or a comment stating, "We ran out of food for this program," does not make an assessment plan the confusion and initial paralysis sets in. Some departments may find themselves searching for a sense of purpose or asking why they must do assessment. You can help facilitate

this phase by offering reassurance that you will guide their activities and they are not alone in this process. Convey to them that you are there to guide activities and you will provide forms, templates, and even online assessment devices for their convenience and ease of use. Share copies of assessment plans and tools from other departments or divisions similar to their own. Make yourself available for questions and concerns. Offer the department a resource list with articles, books, and Web sites that can address their questions from an "objective" viewpoint.

Stage 3: **Denial (otherwise known as avoiding the inevitable).**

This stage is characterized by the refusal to believe that a formalized assessment process must be developed and implemented. The most common statement is, "You can't really measure what I teach. It is just an intangible discipline." Denial is fairly amusing to witness. During this phase, faculty and staff will go to extreme lengths to avoid contact with you or your office. To them, you are assessment. If you are non-existent, then the logic follows that the request for an assessment plan will also become non-existent. It is during this phase that your e-mail and voice mail messages inexplicably never get to the intended parties. In addition, as you approach a staff member's office, a forgotten meeting is suddenly remembered or an emergency phone call must be taken. Don't be alarmed if people you have known for several years pass you by on campus and claim not to recognize you. Persistence, patience, and formidable defenses will be needed on your part.

Stage 4: **Frustration/Bargaining.**

Stage 4 could be referred to as the adolescent years. The most productive way for you to approach staff and faculty in this phase is to be firm and consistent. You may find yourself using the broken record technique. If you have developed assessment tools or guidelines for your campus, share those at this time. Typical statements made will include some version of "Do we have to?", "We are too busy", and "Why can't you write our plan? Isn't that your job?" Keep in mind that they will be seeking all possible escape routes from the impending assessment "nightmare." Often, they will offer up the newest or most oblivious staff member as the "department assessment coordinator" in hopes that a sacrifice will appease the assessment gods and goddesses. Remind them that assessment planning is everyone's job and it cannot fall upon one person's shoulders.

Stage 5: **Hesitant Testing.**

Assessment neophytes will be at their most vulnerable and defenseless. You will recognize progression to this stage when you receive an invitation to a staff meeting to discuss assessment. Approach calmly and as quickly as possible. Bring food and copies of all information, handouts, and guidelines that you have provided on at least one occasion already. Often, the destruction of the previously distributed documents will take place out of denial (stage 3) or frustration (stage 4). However, faculty and staff are now beginning to seek solutions and to plan for the task ahead of them. Take advantage of this lull and use this window of opportunity wisely. This is the time they will be most willing to listen to what role assessment can play in their program or area.

Stage 6: **Acceptance.**

Acceptance is the final phase in the model. It is an advanced state of mind and might not ever be fully attained. Generally speaking, most faculty and staff with whom you will work arrive successfully at this stage. In due time, you will detect in their demeanor an appreciation of the significance behind assessing programs and courses. As goals are accomplished and student learning outcomes achieved, successes will be celebrated. When shortcomings occur, they will be corrected and changes implemented for the next assessment cycle. New methodology will be embraced and policy decisions will be based on evidence and not anecdotal circumstances. Student services, programs, and courses will undergo a continuous improvement cycle ultimately resulting in cohesive implementation and achievement of the university's mission.

Here is the bad news. At this point, you and your staff will go straight into stage 3 (denial). You pretend that you will never have to explain, discuss, define, or present on the topic of assessment planning again. You tell yourself that everyone in the division knows how to create and use an assessment plan on their own. You try to hide from the fact that teaching assessment is not a "place" to reach in order to check it off of your to-do list. You want to delay the inevitable.

But, once in awhile, after sending the memo requesting the annual assessment plans, something miraculous will happen. In response to your request, you will receive a model assessment plan by the specified due date. It will contain a clearly defined purpose, concise measures, and even a completed use of results section. Furthermore, supporting documents are attached. Documents in hand, you escort your staff to Veritable Paradise.

References

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2007

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