Toward the Desired State: Developing More Helpful Relationships between Districts and Technical Assistance Providers

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Technical Assistance in Schools and Districts

Districts commonly work with multiple technical assistance (TA) providers at the same time. Milbrey McLaughlin and Dana Mitra liken the typical district policy environment to a "pharmacy, with multiple and often incompatible 'prescriptions' at work simultaneously."[1] These prescriptions, intended to advance some sort of improvement, often involve the assistance of non-district providers. These providers could be researchers, intermediaries, community agencies, institutes of higher education, consultants, philanthropic organizations, and/or grant agencies. Their function to the district is to provide expertise in the form of knowledge, methodologies, and/or tools and materials.

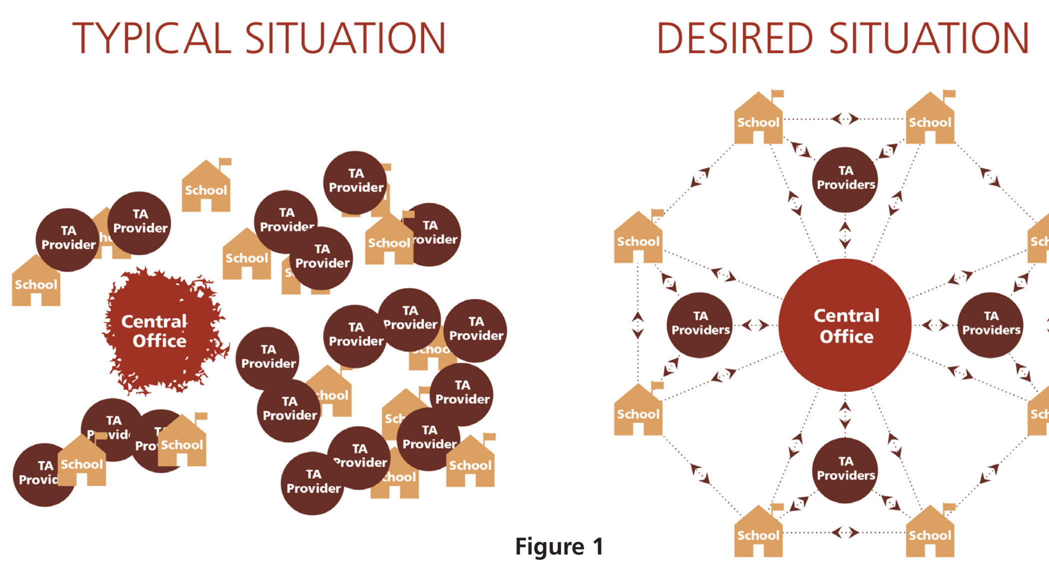

Figure 1

Typically, when multiple TA organizations work in the same district—even with the same educators—they work separately and compete for the scarce time and attention of educators. (See Figure 1: Typical Situation.) The precious resource of educators' time is largely controlled by district actors, whose job responsibilities include coordinating, implementing, cohering the various strands of technical assistance occurring in the district, and making sure that those strands support district goals—tasks that are challenging in most districts and often not well performed. (See Figure 1: Desired Situation.) The lack of coordination, communication, and coherent implementation of the support provided by TA providers in schools and across schools

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within a district contributes to the failure to benefit fully from the assistance.

A related problem is that the support TA providers give is not always helpful to educators. Furthermore, the clients (e.g., teachers and/or administrators) with whom TA providers work are not always entirely receptive to the support provided, even when they have sought it out. Organizational scholar, Edgar Schein, claims that unhelpful help is actually a quite common occurrence because helping is such “a complex phenomenon.”[2] Schein describes helping as a social process and argues that, in order for help to be genuinely helpful, the quality and nature of the relationship between the would-be-helper and the client matters enormously.

To aid with this common and somewhat intractable problem that technical assistance is not always as helpful as desired, we have developed a set of questions for would-be educational clients and technical assistance providers to ask themselves and one another before, during, and after help occurs. The *Questions to Ask* tool (see Table 1) focuses on the help that is needed and wanted (*Interests*), who the technical assistance is intended for and the help that is available (*Information*), and making more explicit the nature of the helping relationship that will exist between the helper and the client (*Ideology*). Schein argues that, in order for help to be genuinely helpful, a level of trust and intimacy is required in the helper-client relationship that is typically lacking in our working

TOWARD THE DESIRED STATE: QUESTIONS TO ASK

District		Technical Assistance (TA) Provider
What are the goals for the technical assistance? ▪ Of the central office administrator(s)? ▪ Of the site administrator(s) ▪ Of the teacher(s)?	**Interests**	**Who are the clients? (Funders? Users? Beneficiaries?)** ▪ What are the client's goals? ▪ How well do the client's goals match the TA provider's expertise and interests?
Which groups are expected to benefit from the Technical Assistance? ▪ In what ways? ▪ What are the strengths, interests & needs of these people or groups?	**Information**	**What does the TA provider need to know about the clients?** ▪ How can the provider learn about the strengths, interests, and needs of the clients? ▪ Who are the essential people from whom to learn?
How will the district approach using the TA knowledge, methods and/or tools? ▪ How will decisions about TA get made and communicated to increase coherence? ▪ How might the "use" of TA across system boundaries be coordinated & communicated?	**Ideology**	**How does the provider approach TA?** ▪ What does its approach look like & involve? ▪ How willing or able is the TA provider to change its approach to meet client(s)' strengths, interests, and needs? ▪ Who makes decisions and how are they made?
How will the district support high quality use of the TA? ▪ What conditions are necessary for success? ▪ How might these conditions get created? ▪ What does successful implementation look like?	**Institutional Context**	**What constraints or limitations does the TA provider have to work within?** ▪ What conditions support effective implementation? Constrain implementation? ▪ In what ways can the TA provider respond to variability and churn?

Table 1

relationships, a problem often exacerbated when an "expert" is involved.[3] This need for greater trust and intimacy contributes to the complexity of providing help in a district environment where teachers and principals are not always engaged in the selection of the TA provider. The complexity increases when TA providers attempt to provide help in an environment where coordination of efforts can be limited or lacking, where communication between TA providers and clients is often insufficient, and where multiple TA providers are simultaneously enlisted to provide help (the "typical" district situation depicted in Figure 1).

The Development of This Tool

This tool is a result of studying the work of three different TA providers who collaborated with one another to coordinate their TA offerings with the goal of providing coherent assistance and helpful support to a school district. As part of this two-year study, planning sessions and technical assistance were observed, materials were reviewed, classrooms were visited, and interviews were conducted with everyone involved in this work, from the central office to the classrooms to the TA providers. The aim of the study was to examine the ways in which the district and the TA providers interacted and the extent to which the district took up the TA knowledge and tools. In other words, the study tried to understand: 1) what makes technical assistance genuinely useful to clients and 2) what supports and constrains the coherence of multiple TA providers operating in the same district.

This tool, *Toward the Desired State: Questions to Ask*, grew out of our analysis of this data and responds to the common problem that educators and TA providers alike lack an adequate understanding about what is actually required for systemic instructional change to occur. This lack of understanding contributes to problematic decision-making regarding the selection and provision of technical assistance. (See *How Interests, Ideology, and Information Affect Collaboration Among "Aligned" Technical Assistance Providers*, forthcoming, for a full description of the study.)

Toward the Desired State: Questions to Ask

The tool is organized within a conceptual framework that specifies four areas of influence in organizational decision-making. Carol Weiss has described these areas—interests, ideologies, information, and institutional context—in a theory of decision-making that she called the "Four I's."[4] For TA providers and districts, the Four I's framework focuses analytic attention on the particular interests, ideologies, information, and institutional contexts that both TA providers and districts bring to the helper-client relationship. As Weiss pointed out and our study confirms, "different people [or organizations in this situation] bring different interests, different ideologies, and different information to the decision-making task."[5] These differences influence the manner in which the help is provided, how it is received by the client, and how genuinely useful it is. These differences often are hidden initially and only emerge overtime—and usually when difficulties arise. A tool that could aid TA providers and districts (prospectively and retrospectively) in the process of self-examination and communication of their strengths, interests, and needs might make more genuinely helpful TA support possible.

How to Use the Tool

The goal for using this tool is to aid self-examination and communication between educators and TA providers. The tool consists of sets of question that are organized by conceptual category (the rows) and by partner role (the columns). Considering each column of questions starting with the column that describes one's own role (e.g. district actor or TA provider) may help each person (or group) prepare for a more effective partnership. In the District column, the questions can help district decision-makers think strategically about who ought to be involved in the decision-making, consider who is expected to benefit from the TA, and imagine how the district will support high quality use of the technical assistance. In the TA Provider column, the questions can help TA providers consider what they need to understand about a particular district context as well as identify the conditions under which their approach to technical assistance has been most successful with clients. Reading down the partner's column of questions may also be useful for considering essential information to gather from partners.

The questions in both the District and TA Provider columns can and probably should be asked by both the TA provider and the client (e.g., central office administrators, site administrators, and teachers). In other words, it is equally important for the district and for the TA provider to ask themselves and each other, "What are the goals for the technical assistance?" and "Who are the clients?" Answers to these questions are sometimes assumed. Rarely are the answers simple or entirely straightforward. For instance, the relationships between TA provider and a district are often multi-faceted and exist across levels of the district system. A central office administrator may initiate a relationship with a TA provider on behalf of one or more schools to work with groups of teachers but may not involve the school principals or the teachers, themselves, in making this decision. As a result, TA providers can find that there are multiple categories of clients with whom they must work or upon whom they depend—central office administrators, school principals, and teachers—each of whom are likely to have different goals, needs, and understanding of the effort. Using *Questions to Ask* may help uncover the multiple clients that the TA provider needs to work with and get to know, as well as elucidate some of the different goals and needs for technical assistance.

Another way to use the tool is to guide a conversation between district decision-makers and TA providers. As a conversation guide, the tool might best be used row by row to organize a conversation between the partners in which they reveal and discuss their own interests in the project, share relevant information, discuss their ideologies—in other words, their ways of thinking about technical assistance—and talk about aspects of their own institutional environments that can enable and/or possibly constrain the goals of the partnership. The sort of dialogue between TA providers and districts that the *Questions to Ask* tool tries to support may enable earlier and better decisions and activities to support fertile relationships among and between TA providers and districts.

When to Use the Tool?

The *Questions to Ask* tool can be used by a district before TA providers are selected as an opportunity to examine the district's goals for technical assistance, identify the groups that need to be part of the TA selection process, and/or consider the existing conditions within the district and the extent to which conditions are likely to support (or constrain) their technical assistance goals. Through such internal examination, a district can become more aware of the approach to TA that will best serve its needs and context conditions. This way, a district becomes better able to discern if a TA provider's approach to TA will be a good fit with the district's desires or determine if the readiness conditions currently exist within the district to make effective use of TA now. If a district determines that some critical readiness conditions are missing, then these questions can help a district plan for how to develop these readiness conditions. A district might realize that, in order to support actual and more effective use of the TA, targeted users of the technical assistance will need ongoing opportunities to share their use of the strategies, methods, and tools with others; receive feedback on their use; and look for evidence that their use of the TA is having the intended and desired effects. In this way, the *Questions to Ask* tool can help a district know where and how to begin to prepare for more effective use of TA.

The tool can also be used as a TA provider-client relationship is just beginning to help a project initiate effectively. The questions can become a way to check on and assess how decisions are made within the district-TA provider relationship and can be used to identify needed adjustments. Finally, used at the end of a project, the questions become a way to take stock of various decision-making behaviors and to bring greater understanding to a project's successes and shortcomings, and improve future TA-district relationships.

[1] McLaughlin, M., & Mitra, D. (2001). Theory-based change and change-based theory: Going deeper, going broader. *Journal of Educational Change*, 2, 301–323, p. 315.

[2] Schein, E. (2009). *Helping: How to offer, give, and receive help*. Berret-Koehler Publishers, Inc.: Oakland, CA, p. 1.

[3] Schein, E. (2016). *Humble Consulting*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.: Oakland, CA.

[4] For more information about the four "I's" framework, see "The Four "I's" of School Reform: How Interests, Ideology, Information and Institution Affect Teachers and Principals," by C. Weiss, 1995, *Harvard Educational Review*, 65(4), 571- 592. See also, "Ideology, Interests, and Information: The Basis of Policy Implementation," by Weiss, C.H., 1983, in *Ethics, the Social Sciences, and Policy Analysis* (pp. 213–245), edited by D. Callahan & B. Jennings , New York, NY: Plenum Press.

[5] Weiss, C. (1995), p. 573.

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