Sustaining Faculty Organizational Development through Teambuilding Activities

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ABSTRACT

Organizational development is a continuous effort at helping people to enjoy working together as a team towards reaching their individual and organizational goals (Argyris & Schon, 1978, 1996, French & Bell, 1995, Bolman & Deal, 1997). Team building activity is one of the mechanisms used by organization to develop sustainable organizational culture (Finger & Brand, 1999; Prichard & Ashleigh, 2007; Senge, 1990). Like other learning organizations, universities are also using team building activities in their organizational development exercises. It is interesting to unveil to what extent do team building activities which are normally carried out within and outside campus impact staff morale and spirit of working as a team. This study aims to evaluate the impact of team building activities on faculty organizational culture. This paper discusses the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of a team building program organized by a faculty. It describes and analyzes the planning, implementation and evaluation components of the whole teambuilding activity. The findings of the study contribute to the knowledge on how team building activities can assist universities in developing sustainable organizational culture in academia.

INTRODUCTION

The three main responsibilities of a university are to continuously provide high quality teaching, research and services to the community at large. In order to continuously develop itself as an organization, the university management relies on a strong pool of human resources which include academics, administrative officers and support staff. Organization development is a continuous effort at helping people to enjoy working together as a team towards reaching their individual and organizational goals (Argyris & Schon, 1978, 1996, French & Bell, 1995, Bolman & Deal, 1997). Team building activity is one of the mechanisms used by organization to develop strong human resources (Finger & Brand, 1999, Philips & Elledge,1989; Prichard & Ashleigh, 2007; Senge, 1990, Senge et. al, 2000).

Like other organizations, universities are also moving towards using team building activities in their organizational development exercises. It is interesting to investigate to what extent do team building activities which are normally carried out within and outside campus affect staff morale and spirit of working as a team. This study aims to evaluate the impact of team building activities on faculty organizational development. The findings of the study are anticipated to contribute to the knowledge on how and what types of team building activities can assist universities in developing their human resources. This paper is a systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of a team building program organized by a faculty to allow informed judgments about program improvement, program effectiveness, and decisions about future programming. Fundamentally, the objectives of the study are as follows:
1. To determine the relevancy of the team building activities and content towards staff workplace context.
2. To determine the level of use of information and experience gained from teambuilding activities in facilitating their professional and personal development i.e. teamwork, team learning, academic development, technical development, social and ethical well-being.

**Using Communities of Practice Model to understand Team Building in Organization Development**

In the context of this study, we view organization development as a form of situated learning process whereby members of an organization are actually members of a community of practice. Becoming a member of an organization requires one to participate and interact with others within specific socio-cultural settings (Vygotsky, 1962; Bruner, 1991; Engestrom, 1987; Suchman, 1987; Lave, 1988; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Chaiklin and Lave, 1993; Wertsch et al., 1995; Wenger, 1998; Engestrom, 2001). Hence, we chose to use the communities of practice model (COPs) (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) as a conceptual framework to understand the use of team building in organization development.

According to the COP model, the situated learning environment enables individuals to ‘grow’ and become better participants or in the context of this study, better team members. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) model of COPs originates from a social theory of learning. A COP is: a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretative support necessary for making sense of its heritage. Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98).

A COP is ‘formed among people whose interaction effects “mutual engagement”, “a negotiated enterprise”, and “a repertoire of negotiable resources” accumulated over time’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 126). The three dimensions of a COP establish to what extent an individual is ‘a competent participant, an outsider or somewhere in between’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 137). Wenger (1998) elaborated the three dimensions as follows:

- “Mutuality of engagement” denotes the ability to engage with other members and respond in kind to their actions, and thus the ability to establish relationships in which this mutuality is the basis for an identity of participation.
- “Accountability to the enterprise” means the ability to understand the enterprise of a community of practice deeply enough to take some responsibility for it and contribute to its pursuit and to its ongoing negotiation by the community.
- “Negotiability of the repertoire” refers to the ability to make use of the repertoire of the practice to engage in it. This requires enough participation (personal or vicarious) in the history of a practice to recognise it in the elements of its repertoire. It requires the capability and the legitimacy to make this history newly meaningful. (Wenger, 1998, p. 137)

A COP indicates a practice that jointly connects working, learning and sharing information. Studies on career and organisational socialisation have developed similar concepts to COP namely occupational community and career community (Bell and Staw, 1989; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Parker et al., 2004). Both communities provide the environment and resources for members to develop a strong work team, a rich organizational culture and efficient work practices.

In a COP, learning to participate improves one’s primary practice. Learning is a form of social engagement (Ball, 2003) which enables members to share experiences, reflect and improvise any rules and norms of the community. Learning is ‘a way of being in the social world, not a way of coming to
know about it’ (Hanks, 1991, p. 24). To what extent does team-building provide the avenue for this form of learning? This is a big question that warrants further exploration.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach in investigating the team building process. Data were collected through participant observation and document analysis of materials emanated from the teambuilding activities. The participants include academics, administrative and support staff from a faculty in a university.

Formative evaluations were also conducted during the development of the program with the intent to improve the program. This process evaluation, which was done via observation and document analysis, described the program and its outcomes. In addition, data collected from a summative evaluation exercise conducted on campus after coming back from the team building program were also used to analyze the process and understand the phenomenon.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the discussion of the findings collected from the observation both at the training site and at the campus. The discussion is arranged according to the two guiding research questions.

To what extent do the team building activities address issues related to staff workplace context?

As mentioned in the earlier part of the paper, the main objective of the program was to improve the effectiveness of implementing one’s responsibility and ability to work in a team towards achieving excellence within the faculty. Analysis of the program book revealed that the training participants were expected to have:

- Understood the importance of staff roles and responsibilities in implementing the vision, mission and goals of the faculty;
- Understood clearly the organizational structure of the faculty and their role within the overall faculty structure;
- Understood their job responsibilities so that they can implement their tasks honestly, productively and effectively;
- To form/develop a cooperative spirit with colleagues through teambuilding activities.

Our observation and analysis of the output produced by the participants found that the team building program carried out provided experiences and learning opportunities in a number of important areas relating to teambuilding and organizational development such as problem solving, identifying organizational strengths and weaknesses, strategizing to overcome organizational challenges, bridging the gap between support staff and academic staff and others. The training provider seemed not to put an emphasis on explaining the overall aim of the program to the participants. Instead, they straightly went to instruct participants to complete a number of teambuilding tasks. Our observation found that some participants got carried away with the mechanistic nature of the tasks at the expense of conceptualizing the underlying message of each task in relation to teambuilding.

Hence, little was achieved in terms of understanding specific team members’ roles and responsibilities toward implementing the vision, mission and objectives of the faculty. Likewise, little
was covered regarding the overall organizational structure of the faculty and how each participant contributes to the mission of the organization. Furthermore, little attention was paid toward helping participants understand their specific job responsibilities and how each contributes to the overall mission of the faculty. There was some effort toward building the cooperative spirit of the faculty.

In terms of how the participants thought about working together as a team, we noticed that most of them were working slightly less well at the beginning as they were no icebreaking sessions, no group-binding session conducted prior before undertaking the group assignment. Trainers seemed to believe that the groups are already at their very best as a team and this premature assumption created some chaotic situations at the beginning of the program. Personal attacks, arguments were rampant and these were understood by participants to be part and parcel of teambuilding activities. Some participants commented that they understood the importance of healthy argument but things got out of hand when some participants took advantage of the situations and began to verbally abuse each other. We concluded that the trainers failed to address the issue of work culture, rank, role and status which actually may become the barriers and enhancers of developing a strong team (McGreevy, 2006).

To what extent do team building activities impact staff professional and personal development

Our analysis of the activities conducted throughout the program revealed that they were not tailored to the specific needs of the faculty and was more general in nature. Because the program was not tailored specifically to the needs of the faculty, some of the participants reported not being able to make the connection between the activities conducted and how to apply the significant learning to the context of the faculty. Trainers failed to highlight the felt and unfelt needs of the different groups/levels of the faculty staff. We believe that these needs should have been identified and discussed at the university prior to going for the program itself. This is very important so that all the participants would have begun the program with the same common goal and started from the same reference point.

We also found out that trainers spent minimal effort to discuss the organizational structure of the faculty and participants’ roles within the overall faculty structure. In terms of the overall structure of the faculty, many staff members still understand organizational structure as a barrier and a source of conflict/difference rather than a medium of understanding that each person has a unique and important role to play in the organization. Our perception was that many of the participants still cannot see how the staff can complement one another despite their different job responsibilities and levels.

To a certain extent, the program revealed that there seems to be a gap in understanding between different levels of staff. The cooperative spirit cannot be achieved through a one-off program. Cooperative spirit is a component of work culture and the program highlighted that we have certain aspects of our work culture that detract from the cooperative spirit.

During the activity in the jungle, the group leaders were very proactive in working together with the other teams and in delegating responsibilities with a spirit of unity and cooperation. However, during the following day’s raft-building activity, the teams did not replicate the lessons from the night before. For example, the role of the environment played a major part in how the groups carried out their tasks. In the jungle, the environment was such that in order to survive and to overcome the various threats, there was a need to work together. However, during the raft-building activity, the atmosphere was totally different. Even though there was an explicit need to work together in order to complete the task successfully, we noticed that the lack of an immediate threat to safety, health, well-being and the like blinded the groups to the need to work together. In other words, the threats were less apparent or visible and as a result, the groups did not see the need to form a strategic alliance to complete the task. An important lesson that can
be taken from the experience was that trainers and participants should have highlighted the opportunities and threats as a faculty so that participants will understand that cooperation is important at all times, professionally and personally. The weaknesses of the program have ironically broadened the existing gap between different levels of staff. Our fear was that this gap will grow and worsen and thus the faculty members will become more ineffective, uncaring, individualistic, not only at the training site, but also at their workplace.

Evidences of public personal attacks that took place during the program created some level of perceived impact on the targeted individuals in the eyes of the others and trainers should have tried their best to educate participants on the danger of misperception, prejudice and labeling. We realized that the teambuilding activities were intentionally designed to create situations with a certain level of conflict in order to get participants to experience the nature of the conflict and how to resolve it. However, it seemed as though the conflict that took place during the activities became personalized by certain participants. Furthermore, there was no direct attempt to explain the intention or objective for creating conflict so that resolution could be achieved. As such, it appeared as though certain participants harbored negative feelings and perceptions towards their colleagues. The concern is that such negative feelings/perceptions will be brought back to the workplace.

We concluded that the identification of needs and pertinent issues relating to teambuilding in the faculty from the different levels of staff (as was done at the end of the program) should be done at the university campus prior to the start of the program. This should be done in order to ensure that everyone is clear and starting the program from a shared point of reference. The following diagram summed up how we think a COP model can be used to develop a strong team at a faculty and any other organization.

![Figure 1: Cultivating A Strong Team using Community of Practice Model (Wenger, 2002)](image-url)
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we strongly believe that the program developer managed to educate the participants on the technical ‘how to’ of team building. However, concrete discussion between the Faculty management and the training program provider on the specific needs of the faculty should be done in the first place so that the provider can better tailor the program to participants’ needs. Besides that, more conscious and concrete connection should be done following each program activity to tie the significant learning back to the situation in the Faculty. This must be done in order to ensure that everyone in attendance can connect the activity to their roles in the Faculty and understand the underlying meaning or rationale of each activity. This is how ‘double loop’ learning (Argyris and Schon, 1996; Senge, 1990) helps to tie the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of any training program so that participants can really benefit from their training experiences.

Furthermore, there should be more intentional effort to provide time and space for spiritual reflection and learning on the meaning of the course activities. The spiritual dimension acts as the guide for our intellectual, emotional and cultural elements as individuals. Without an explicit attempt to connect the actual activities to the spiritual, intellectual, emotional and cultural elements, participants have difficulty understanding the ‘big’ meaning and purpose behind such activities and the whole program. For example, when one approaches their work as a ‘calling’ or as a form of ‘worship’, there is a greater chance of undertaking one’s work with integrity, accountability, the desire to cooperate and to uplift one’s colleagues, honesty, respect, productivity and the like. This can be achieved if trainers spend more time for ice-breaking and getting-to-know-you sessions in the beginning of the program so as to help participants to better appreciate the different roles of staff in the organization.

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REFERENCES


