

Building awareness of Mental Models

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Abstract

This paper describes an intervention design for a highly creative team that struggles with internal team relations. The paper begins with an assessment of the organization as a potential learning organization and outlines a proposed intervention to further realize group aspirations. I will begin by taking stock of existing organizational structures, work patterns, and developmental habits. The group has undertaken a sequence of progressive steps to build capability to function interpersonally and to learn together experientially and by expanding the group knowledge base. I will summarize recent themes of improvement, reflect on the outcomes of these group learning exercises, and attempt to use existing capabilities and trends as a foundation on which to design the intervention. I'll conclude by describing a desired future state that may result if the intervention takes hold.

Defining the Organization

My Role in the Organization

This paper describes an intervention design for a highly creative team that struggles with internal team relations. As a manager in the unit and a member of the leadership team, I hold a deep responsibility for the development of the staff and feel compelled to facilitate and support their growth as individuals and as a group. As I have progressed in my career I find there are now times that my formal title becomes a barrier to communication and leads to less than savory assumptions about my motives. I am still new to this reaction people often have to formal supervisors and managers, but find myself able to recognize it fairly consistently, which at least allows me to respond appropriately. As a formal leader and senior (but not most senior) manager I have distinct advantages that uniquely position me to apply an intervention to encourage progress towards learning organization ideals. I have regular contact with a broad range of the staff, actually in this case all of the staff. As a member of leadership I have easy access to and a strong bond with the other senior managers. I have a strong influence on strategic planning and development priorities. I also have the benefit of not having the final say, which I like to think allows me to remain open to riskier solutions than a chief executive might be.

Organizational Structure & Context

To fulfill the organizational mission, the unit employs a number of highly creative technically proficient staff members that generally expect to be treated like creative professionals. The unit is organized into distinct groups based on job role. Each group has a predominant technical background and many members share similar educational foundations that

are particular to their group. As a result, staff members tend to relate more readily to peers in their work unit than colleagues in another group. Because of the technical nature of the work in a field where knowledge has a two or four-year useful shelf-life, the concept of an expert remains very fluid. The unit culture recognizes expertise and assigns a value to others in the organization based on their competence, ability to learn new technology, and produce high quality work. Unfortunately, the fragmented nature of expertise and the ever-shifting sands of technology require and encourage individual learning but make group and peer learning difficult and often overlooked.

Furthermore, working in the context of a major research university further complicates the environment for organizational learning. Most of our staff have not been longtime higher education workers, some have previous corporate experience, but most understand the university best from the perspective of a student, or at best a student-employee. Because our clients are higher education faculty members, the vagaries of life in an academic department are sometimes exposed in fleeting moments to the staff. Attempts to build a rational model to explain the behavior of the system in which the unit functions often break down because they are too simple to capture the complexity of a higher-education decision making environment without clear organizational specialization as found in the corporate world. Staff members frequently find it frustrating that a client or department doesn't do what seems obvious from their singular perspective.

Defining a Desired State as a Learning Organization

All staff members were recently involved in a unit-wide effort to define core values and a shared vision of what the unit would be like in the future. As part of this exercise the whole staff

was taken on a mini-retreat out of the office. Leadership hired an outside facilitator to guide the exercise, moving the center of attention away from management. The facilitator allowed everyone to participate and the course of the exercise was influenced by everyone. To define a desired future state, all team members were asked to contribute thoughts about how they'd like the unit to be years in the future. Ideas contributed included concepts about how expert, recognizable, and respected the unit would be. Other thoughts focused on what a significant impact the group would have on campus, and the quality results that would be produced, and the level of engagement or even partnership the unit would have externally. A significant amount of contributions referred to the need to improve and work better as a group, with conflict that was constructive with less divisive argument.

As the unit defined thematic areas for the core values, the vision of a creative learning organization of autonomous professionals took greater shape. Thematic areas selected for core values included: Respect; Creativity; Innovation; Teamwork; Freedom; Autonomy; Communication; and Listening. The group wants to be able to self organize and share in continuous creation of vision and goals. People want to be able to work together creatively with a mutual respect. It is expected that things will be done better in teams than as individuals. The group expects every individual to seek out and master new knowledge which can be applied to new services and products. Risk is accepted, encouraged and embraced.

The Challenging Road Ahead

I'd like to use the concept of a "psychological contract" as explained by Kolb, Rubin, and Osland (1995),

When individuals join an organization, they form an unwritten, implicit, or

(less frequently) explicit, psychological contract with the organization. This contract consists of the mutual expectation employees and employers have of each other. The psychological contract is based on the perception of both the employee and the employer that their contributions obligate the other party to reciprocate. (p.5)

The work unit has evolved over time and organizational and environmental change has left it's scars on the veterans of the group. The group began very small with just a few pioneers that founded a small experimental 'project'. The 'project' grew evolving into a 'laboratory' which eventually grew and became so mainstreamed that it is now just another 'unit'. The particular technology field they work in was once very edgy and cool, now it is somewhat expected and just part of a defined niche in the industry. The staff members generally like to be creators, innovators, and builders of technology solutions, and are demoralized when viewed as technical support, documentation authors, or worker bees. Often veteran members nostalgically reminisce of the "good old days" when the unit was small and young, frequently taking a romantically positive one-sided view of the past. Newer members of the organization become disoriented by this view, since they generally view the unit as getting better all the time (since they joined). This is a retelling of a combined viewpoint that I hold, but I suspect is not apparent to most staff that hold one or the other. An eventual goal of team learning and shared vision, perhaps achieved through dialogue might be that we all form a common psychological contract with the rest of the group.

When the unit grew rapidly and began to create a traditional organizational hierarchy the laissez-faire style of previous administrations was gradually replaced with traditional rules and policies aimed at standardizing behavior. To some employees these changes violated a

“psychological contract” they perceived between themselves and the unit. (Kolb, Rubin, and Osland, 1995) The contract perceived for some was one with a high degree of professional discretion; basically they expected management to give them leeway to handle the job any way they deemed fit. Because their expectations were violated and they associate management actions as negative a breakdown in trust occurs (Brodt, Korsgaard, Werner, and Whitener, 1998). This group of staff members remains unlikely to buy into management suggestions for change or improvement, making it critical that the group as a whole achieve consensus on goals, means to achieve it, and how to get started. Trust between management and employees underscores much of the work that must be done to form a better shared vision, yet this very gap inhibits team learning.

Fortunately, most members of the organization already perceive the area of greatest need in a similar way. Many in the group prefer to accept decisions that are reached unanimously or at least with consensus. Despite this there are many individuals that are not fluent consensus builders or even willing to compromise certain strongly held positions. There is also a tendency for friction to escalate during group discussion or decision making to the point of lasting relationship damage between members. While many recognize this tendency, there is a sense of powerlessness about mitigating, minimizing, or eliminating the dysfunctional status-quo. This problem remains challenging because discussions on how to improve the situation tend to collapse into the very symptoms the group aims to eliminate.

The inability to achieve our full potential working in teams or as a large group impacts much of the internal unit work. With clients the individuals function very well. When only a few staff members participate in inter-unit committees and teams the results are often extraordinary. In a sense, because members all identify with the group so tightly, they assume

too much and fail to listen, tending to think aloud and talk past each other. When working in large teams on internal projects there remains a potential for greater respect, utilization of all members, and trust of teammates. Since the core value of trust and respect was recently considered the most important, there is group consensus behind improving that aspect of our working environment. Our inspirational values are a guide towards a better future state and the majority believes that something should be done. I hope to leverage this common understanding and the groundswell of interest to help introduce a discipline which hopefully will be assimilated by the group who will expand on my initial intervention by taking ownership of implementation and mastery.

Mastering the Discipline of Team Learning

I believe this group would perform to their full potential and would achieve greater satisfaction with their decision making, relationships, and outcomes if they were able to master skillful discussion and dialogue. This would allow for functional and timely decisions that were reached by group consensus and not by management authority. Such decisions would be more inline with group expectations and would likely be optimal more often. In cases where the group gets it wrong, everyone would be able to discuss why and have an opportunity to make better decisions in the future instead of selecting a scapegoat or pointing fingers at other groups.

The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook suggests that teams hoping to practice dialog “should first learn basic inquiry and reflection skills” (Senge et al, 1994). To become fluent in dialogue, individuals must become more aware of their assumptions and inferences that they currently take as reality by reflecting on their mental models. Reflective skills allow an individual to slow down their thinking and become more aware of how their mental models are formed (Senge et al, 1994). Individuals must also be able to inquire about the reasoning and assumptions held by

others, and balance this with their impulse to advocate their own position which currently dominates most conversations. Inquiry skills allow participants in a conversation to expose their views and make tacit assumptions clear to each other (Senge et al, 1994).

Each individual carries with them a different perspective of reality and remains largely unaware that others perspectives can be very different from their own. Rick Ross notes in the Fifth Discipline Fieldbook (Senge et al, 1994) that “we live in a world of self-generating beliefs which remain largely untested. We adopt those beliefs because they are based on conclusions, which are inferred from what we observe, plus our past experience.” Because individuals have perceptive screens and select a subset of data that they believe is relevant from that which is available, all assumptions and judgments are built on only a fraction of reality. William Issacs described the tendency to select future subsets of data based on the beliefs and conclusions of the past as the “reflexive loop” (Senge et al, 1994). By reflecting after encounters and deconstructing our mental models, we can hope to better anticipate and be aware of how they influence our future interactions. Over time this allows us to become more aware of our thought process and better able to express this thought process to others. Even becoming aware of the impact of mental models may lead many people to be more interested in helping others to expose and make explicit their assumptions. Clearing up these assumptions will go far to restore the potential for trust. Further skillful discussion will build on this potential by replacing negative assumptions with positive ones.

I have already begun the process by beginning to integrate into my work reflective exercises and have been focusing on inquiry during my discussions with others. By providing time in my daily ritual for reflective opportunities and exercises I am becoming more aware of my biases, assumptions, and inferences which equip me better to perceive the truth. When I

exercise modes of inquiry it not only helps me to understand others, opening the opportunity for meaningful connections, but it also demonstrates to others a fundamental skill for team learning. In this manner, I hope to gradually introduce these skills to the group. I will move on to coaching individuals in response to flare-ups of misunderstanding, impasse, or frustration. In this way I will begin to pass on techniques that can be incorporated in a private and less threatening manner than a public workshop.

Even so, I suspect time must be set aside at all stages because as Charlotte Roberts notes: “People who accept different points of view intellectually may have trouble with the emotions raised by this work” (Senge et al, 1994). By tapping the motivation to move towards group decision making and achieve better interpersonal relationships, I hope to gradually but continually expand the introduction of these skills. To begin with I will attempt to lead some workshop exercises for our leadership team, who are most likely to fully invest in an effort to master these disciplines. By working in small groups or by hiring a facilitator to guide exercises eventually we may work through a curriculum of reflective exercises, inquiry techniques, and dialogue skills as a whole staff.

As a leadership group we frequently bring readings for the benefit of the others development and to provide a common foundation for discussion. I plan to introduce mental models to the leadership group by bringing a handout of “Skilled Incompetence” by Chris Argyris (1996). This provides both an anecdotal example and a solid introduction to the material on the “left hand column” and “ladder of inference” exercises which I can guide us through using material from the article and the Fifth Discipline Fieldbook (Senge et al, 1994). After a couple of weeks practicing with these exercises, I’d like to advance to discussing a “balance of inquiry

and advocacy” (Senge et al, 1994) to challenge my management colleagues to start practicing their inquiry skills with their subordinates and with each other.

The chart by Rick Ross and Charlotte Roberts (Senge et al, 1994) that lays out taxonomy of advocacy/inquiry balances is an interesting visual and starting point to discussions about finding an effective balance. Handouts of pages 253-263 of the Fifth Discipline Fieldbook (Senge et al, 1994) should provide a sampling of “lines” that can be borrowed to use like training wheels while we practice the art of dialog in our leadership meetings. The “Opening Lines” section on page 263 of the Fieldbook (Senge et al, 1994) provides some useful strategies for helping to relieve escalation in our full staff meetings during contentious debate. This is a particular need that was identified by our leadership team when we discussed “tools” that we lacked for handling some of our heated conversation tendencies.

The eventual course of this progressive program of introducing theory and practicing exercises to encourage mastery may lead to the introduction of dialogue. I won’t guarantee it here because I think this is a high level discipline that can only be realized if previous fundamentals are mastered by the majority (if not all) of the group. Furthermore, I would need to rely on an external facilitator to enable such an introduction and practice within the team.

Dialogue theory builds on mental models and the balance of advocacy and inquiry and suggests a mode of group conversation that leads to team learning. Building on the mental model work Charlotte Roberts (Senge et al, 1994) states that “the theory of dialogue suggests that breakdowns in the effectiveness of teams and organizations are reflective of a broader crisis in the nature of how human beings perceive the world.” Dialogue will prove to be difficult because of the multiple crisis points that must be traversed to fully realize it’s potential.

First is the “Initiatory” crisis where the team must begin to suspend their assumptions and reflect on their ordinary reactions. Without traversing this gap there will only be a fairly ordinary discussion. Even if participants manage to suspend their assumptions and reflect on themselves to move towards a skillful discussion, frustration frequently ensues with the chaos (Senge, et al 1994). It would be good if participants can begin to surface their tacit assumptions and make them apparent to the rest of the group. I suspect with this group advancing to the level of “Skillful Discussion” would be a great first step and eventual progress towards full dialog may only come with months of continued exposure.

Benefit of Progressing as a Learning Organization

It is hoped that as the group progresses towards “Skillful Discussion” and perhaps dialog we will become more effective decision makers. As the group as a whole can reach more effective decisions by consensus, additional decisions will be made collectively, social contract theory implies that these successful transactions will result in future tendency to function well together and increased trust. Because the workplace expects to function with such a high degree of professional autonomy, buildup of trust between management and employees should form a positive reinforcing loop (Del Favero, 2003). Management can initiate this by working to remove negative mental models that cause them to inhibit trust-reducing behaviors, instead spending more time on behaviors that reinforce a trust rich environment (Brodt et al, 1998).

If the intervention is successful one should observe within the unit a greater use of inquiry during interpersonal exchanges. It is hoped that reflection will be observed in the form of more collaborative idea building and a more profound incidence of respectful treatment of others. Instead of settling for inferior compromises or debating until one idea defeats all others via attrition, the group should conceive of more collective “best of both worlds” solutions. This

may surface in things as simple as suggesting alternatives by saying “and it would be better if” instead of saying “but we should”. Colleagues will aid each other by using mental model references in shorthand during conversation and remaining non-judgmental about misconceptions and assumptions once they are made apparent and discarded. As old assumptions and behavior patterns are replaced with a more open and positive communicative environment, trust will naturally increase. These changes should increase measurable attributes of the group such as our satisfaction, productivity, and retention of key staff.

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