Leadership: Building a team using structured activities

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ABSTRACT

Educators strive to anticipate reactions or outcomes of instruction so that the learning or acquiring of information by others is as pain-free as possible. Leaders also strive to build cohesiveness and trust in groups or teams of employees so that the end goal or task is produced in a timely manner. However, setting the stage or mood for teamwork to occur is one step that needs to be considered for either of those goals to happen. The following paper will review successful structured activities used by the authors in a mid-size southern university.

Keywords: ice-breakers, structured activities, team-building

BACKGROUND

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word structure as "the aggregate of elements of an entity in their relationships to each other" as well as "the action of building" (Merriam-Webster, 2011). Structured activities, sometimes referred to as ice breakers, are defined as "something that breaks the ice on a project or occasion;" and a team is defined as "a number of persons associated together in work or activity" (Merriam-Webster, 2011). "An opening remark, action, etc., designed to ease tension or relieve formality" is another definition for an ice breaker (Dictionary.com, 2011). Team-building is another word that may be used interchangeably with ice-breakers and structured activities. Other words such as warm-ups, de-inhibiters, tension-reducers, brainteasers, getting acquainted activities, feedback/disclosure loops, energizers and games, can also be used. (Forbess-Green, 1980). No matter which word or which definition is used, the idea is the same, to perform some type of action that will assist in changing the mood of a situation into one that is more trusting and relaxed where individuals can begin to interact with and acknowledge each other.

In our working lives, individuals are brought together in order to accomplish an important goal or project usually with input from employees at various levels and departments throughout the organization. When this group first meets, there is typically a level of self-consciousness as individuals may not have worked with each other prior to this activity and are still thinking as an employee within whatever department to which they belong. In order to reduce the feeling of self-consciousness and get the employees to work as a group, team building activities can be used. Many group leaders use a variety of such structured activities during the organization or orientation period. The functions of these activities serve important objectives in the teambuilding process.

According to Chris Gill, there are five reasons to use structured activities: First, to build social introductions among the group. These activities are used to generate a new "team persona" for this set of individuals in order to accomplish a specific objective. Secondly, structured activities are used to build energy within a group. Some questions that can be asked to build energy can be, "What was your first thought when after reading the memo of this assignment? Oh no! Another meeting?" This is a perfectly normal reaction for individuals that have much going on at work and feel that another commitment is imposing on their ability to get everything done. For that reason, active commitment and level of engagement are required by a group to be able to start a new project. Physical and fun activities that build energy are needed for this group to get them out of the normal working mode and into a higher cohesive level of activity. A third function for teambuilding activities is to create a positive atmosphere within a group that allows for enthusiasm and challenges. Overcoming objections and transitioning to work mode are the last two functions of teambuilding activities and such attitudes affects the quality of the outcome. Many times, there will be individuals that believe the process of teambuilding activities are a waste of time; however, the momentum of the activity will serve to engage these individuals before they have time to develop or voice a negative response. Once the group is altered by these exercises, they are then ready to begin the task assigned (Gill, 2009).

Continuing with reasons for using structured activities, the article, *Twelve Tips for Team Building: How to Build Successful Work Teams*, provides insight by listing clear expectations, context, commitment, coordination, cultural change, competency, charter, control, collaboration, communication, consequences and creative innovation as items necessary to building successful

teams.   In order to be able to maximize their contribution to the group, individuals should have a clear understanding of performance expectations as well as the context for their participation within the group. Answers to the following questions should be clear in the minds of all group members: Do the members feel the appropriate people are represented in the group? Do the group members feel free enough to invite others to join their group? Do they want to be on this team? The group must then develop a process by which to communicate within the group and steps by which to complete the objectives. New methods for accomplishing the objective need exploring before communication for its completion can occur (Heathfield, 2008).

Creating a foundation for the tone or culture to be engendered with the group is the first objective for team building. Engaging participants actively in the type of group activity needed, whether to listen or interact with each other, is essential to creating trust and respect. This activity allows a new group to get acquainted with each other, to become comfortable discussing the subject of the group work or to be able to express opposing opinions as a step toward team building (KSTMT, 2011).

In a publication by the University of Vermont for student leaders, structured activities are a method to develop an environment that is non-threatening and allows individuals to get acquainted by having fun. These activities also can serve to form random groupings and break up cliques or factions in order to set the tone for working together (University of Vermont, 2011). No matter the reason for bringing together individuals to work on a project, choosing structured activities with a purpose is important. Remember to select activities that are inclusive of your members' diverse needs; that are appropriate for your group's state of development; that tie in to the topic needing discussion; that fit the session or meeting design; and that fit the location where the activity is held (Balon, 1999). Whether your activities are to be used socially or educationally, practice the art of leading an activity, plan ahead and practice patience. "One of the most important keys to the successful use of icebreakers is the group leader's ability to bridge the gap between the activity and the material that follows" (The Encyclopedia of Icebreakers, 2006).

EXPERIENCES

Functioning as department chairs and a vice president at a mid-size southern university, the authors will walk through a description of one set of activities used to get acquainted and form groups while all along creating opportunities that affect the dynamics of the group through team building opportunities. The authors remind the reader that no one group of activities is the answer to all team building and training development; but rather, leaders and managers are encouraged to build a toolbox of strategies.

STRUCTURED ACTIVITIES FOR GETTING ACQUAINTED

As stated earlier, the initial gathering of a group is often filled with some anxiety, self-consciousness, or perhaps resistance to engaging in a new task. It is incumbent on the leader of the group to set the tone and culture for the group during the first meeting or series of initial meetings. Get acquainted activities allow the leader to have a sense of where the strengths of the group are and which individuals will need to be carried or supported initially. The following are some activities for the initial meetings. These activities require very little preparation time, yet the debriefing of the activity can be very powerful and beneficial in team building.

- In-Animate Objects. One simple activity that works and begins to create a bond among the group is to have them introduce themselves by selecting an in-animate object that best describes symbolically some aspect of their personality/identity.   The object they choose and the significance they provide as they relate themselves to the object opens up a unique method for the group to get to know each other in a very special way.   This creates a special connection among the group known only to themselves and not anyone else in the organization. The creativeness of the self-comparison to the object gives the leader an enormous wealth of understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each individual not to mention the capacity for creative thinking. Another variation of this activity is to have them draw an object (out of a bag of items) and display it to the group as they describe the significance it represents.
- Chinese Zodiac. Another introduction activity is to pass out to each individual a copy of a Chinese Zodiac. These are often found in Chinese restaurants as placemats and most individuals are familiar with them. In your group, have each member locate their respective animal (the animal that is assigned to their birth year) and introduce themselves by sharing with the group how the description of the qualities and characteristics of the animal matches or does not match who they are. By elaborating on how the description is applicable or is not applicable, the group and its leader gain insight into the membership and again form a unique understanding of each other thus leading to a sense of cohesiveness.
- Chinese Fortune Cookies.   Pass out a fortune cookie to each group member. Have them read and reflect silently on their fortune. Then, ask them to introduce themselves to the group by sharing the contents of their fortune cookie and the meaning they attach to the narrative. How does the narrative describe some aspect of who they are and the significance they draw from the narrative? This activity requires them to reflect and express abstract material in a creative yet personal manner.
- Grab Bag Activity.   Fill a bag with a variety of objects that you may have in your office or home. Objects such as small toys, a glove, soap, pencil sharpener, band aids, stapler, etc. can be very useful. Each group member is asked to reach into the bag and draw an object without looking. They are to reflect on the object and introduce themselves by describing how that object represents some aspect of their personality or strength. This activity allows the leader to measure the creativity of the individual members. What we have found is that for those members who seem to draw a blank on how to use the object in their description, other group members will jump in and give meaning to the object in order to help the individual. When this happens, the leader of the group can begin to have a sense of the bonding that is occurring in the group.

STRUCTURED METHOD FOR FORMING GROUPS USING GET ACQUAINTED ACTIVITIES

Depending on the size of the group or team that is involved, subgroups for a variety of tasks or projects may need to be created or the seating arrangements may simply need to be varied. Often members tend to gravitate to persons they know in the group but in many instances the leader may want to mix the membership of the subgroups. One creative way to do this is to place them with individuals in the group who have similar interests as identified during the various get-acquainted activities.   During the above mentioned activities, the leader should be

taking notes of the various clusters of themes that were mentioned, for example in the in-animate objects activity, try grouping all those who described themselves using a water type of object i.e. beach, rivers, waterfall. Another cluster can be accessories i.e. shoes, jewelry, handbags, etc. or still another cluster can be electronics/technology i.e. cell phones, computers, etc. Each of these clusters can be subgroups and can change the seating arrangements. Using the Chinese Zodiac, members could be placed with their similar counterparts falling in the same animal group or with those animal groups more compatible to them as described in the Zodiac.

STRUCTURED ACTIVITY FOR TEAM BUILDING

Once the subgroups have been created using one of the above methods, it is time to begin introducing team building activities. One activity that works well is one that will require the use of plastic water cups. Styrofoam does not work as well as plastic.   Each group is given a package of plastic cups containing from eighty to one hundred cups. The larger the subgroup, the more cups they should be given. They are asked to use the cups to build the tallest structure within the time allowed, usually fifteen to twenty minutes. They are to use all the cups, involve everyone in the group, build one structure, and there is to be no verbal communication. They are allowed only one failed attempt. Observation of the group reveals many interesting dynamics on how members are engaged with each other, the leadership that emerges, and how consensus is built. Debriefing the activity provides rich information to the entire group and provides the opportunity to relate their experience to actual tasks before them.

CONCLUSION

Structured activities are essentially short activities for purposes of establishing a climate of trust and connectedness. These activities are experiential in nature thus engage the entire group. Leaders and managers find that such activities allow them to better understand their employees or group members, begin to see where individual strengths lie, and from whom to expect leadership or creative potential . Structured activities energize the group, help define the group and provide a sense of unity or cohesiveness. A plethora of structured activities exist in the literature and leaders are encourage to adapt variations that best fit their style, purpose and uniqueness of the group as well as the task at hand. It is at this point that the expertise and experience of the leader is essential. Processing the dialog that comes from the experiential activities is crucial and so is providing the relationship of the experience to the goals of the group. The leader of the group needs to be committed to the growth of the group, recognize the value of team building and acknowledge the importance of the uniqueness of each individual in the context of a collective approach to problem solving.

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