Team Consultation

Group Dynamics in Public Administration PUA 566-OL1

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The practitioner

William K. Ditto is a current graduate student at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland. Mr. Ditto is currently enrolled in the college’s Public Administration program. He has worked at the college’s contract postal station since 2006. In his current role, Mr. Ditto is responsible for acting as an assistant supervisor, and he provides management for a small group of student workers. During his studies at McDaniel College, Mr. Ditto has developed an interest for individual reward preferences as well as their relationship to employee motivation. His graduate coursework thus far has included both public administration and human resource classes. He has completed numerous research assignments with a focus on human resources. His passion for fine arts and design work give Mr. Ditto a competitive edge in coming up with creative solutions for problems large and small.

The symptom

For over a decade, a small sign manufacturing company in Hampstead, Maryland has produced, manufactured, and installed signage for businesses throughout Maryland and Southern Pennsylvania. The company has had a reputation of providing a high-level of customer service, and has even been recognized by the local newspaper for providing some of the best service in the area. Recently, the sign shop’s supplier of adhesive-backed vinyl sheeting had discontinued the product line of vinyl sheeting that the shop uses regularly. The adhesive-backed vinyl is used with a cutting machine that cuts the vinyl into custom shapes and lettering for signs, banners, and vehicle lettering. The supplier has introduced a new line of vinyl sheeting, but the sign shop had experienced problems upon using it for the first time. The vinyl would often jam in the cutting machine, producing a lot of waste material and lost production time. It had been determined that the vinyl was incompatible with the shop’s vinyl cutter. Due to the age of the machine, the owner
had decided that it was time to purchase a new state-of-the-art cutting machine. Having little experience with sign fabricating, the shop owner had asked his team of sign fabricators to assist him in choosing a new cutting machine that would offer the best value for the money. He knew that the fabricators would be the primary users of this piece of equipment, so he felt that they should be a part of the decision making process. The owner had intended on giving the team two weeks to make a decision. He had scheduled a series of 20-30 minute team meetings throughout the two weeks prior to the deadline.

Problems began to arise as the team began the decision making process. The team knew how to work together when fabricating signs, but it was having difficulty coming to a consensus, and tensions were on the rise. Some of the fabricators opted for a high cost cutting machine that had more features, while others felt that the shop could make do with a lower cost machine with less options. A higher priced machine with more options meant that the shop could potentially offer more services to increase business. Purchasing a lower cost machine was viewed as more practical, but would do little to enhance the business. The owner was also planning to meet with equipment vendors during the decision making process. These meetings required him to travel away from the shops during scheduled team meetings, but he knew that he needed to remain in contact with the team throughout the decision making process. The shop owner had contacted me in order to provide advice in regards to handling the decision making process, as well as developing a plan for keeping in touch with the fabricators as they met to decide on a new vinyl cutting machine.

Assessing the problem

To fully understand the situation that I had to deal with, I knew that the first logical step was to conduct a one-on-one meeting with the owner of the company. I had first met with the
company owner to discuss what he was hoping to accomplish in this decision making team. I wanted to gain an understanding of the true purpose of the group as the owner had envisioned it. I also wanted to gain an understanding of the role that he was attempting to play in this team. I also requested one-on-one interviews with the members of the fabrication team that would be serving on the equipment purchase team. I wanted to gain an understanding in regards to the experiences that the fabricators have had working as a team. I also knew it as important to gain an understanding of why the team could work well together as fabricators but have difficulties working together as equipment purchasers. I chose to conduct my interviews in a semi-structured format. This allowed me to have some flexibility in the questions that I would be asking. Flexibility within an interview gives the interviewer the power to modify each conversation to probe for information (Franz, 2012). I felt that it was important to gain consistent information from each team member, but I also wanted to avoid any possible intimidation that could have been experienced by conducting a formal interview.

**Intervening**

Upon assessing the problem, I had developed a few possible interventions that would address the problems facing the sign shop. The first problem that I had identified was in regards to the difficulties facing the sign fabricators while deciding on an equipment purchase. The owner had expressed that his fabricators worked well as a team when manufacturing signs. However, as the owner pointed out, problems had arisen when the team of fabricators was given the task of deciding between a high or low-cost machine. I had determined that the underlying problem was related to role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload. Interestingly enough, a moderate amount of stress, resulting from role ambiguity or role conflict, can actually enhance the performance of individuals (Onyema, 2008). The sign fabricators were being asked to
perform in a team environment in which they were unfamiliar with. Too much, or too little, stress resulting from a role conflict or role overload will have a negative outcome (Onyema, 2008). The existing group roles were clearly resulting in a high level of stress. I felt that stress would be reduced if alternative, task-oriented roles were assigned. The method that I chose to address the issues surrounding roles was to conduct a role analysis. The purpose of a role analysis is to help team members immediately clarify their roles and understand what is expected of them as they work within the team (Franz, 2012). Given the time sensitive nature of the equipment purchase, a role analysis seemed to be a likely candidate for getting the decision making process moving. This team already had experience working together as sign fabricators, but deciding on an equipment purchase was something they had not experienced. A role analysis can be conducted formally or informally (Franz, 2012). I had chosen to implement an informal analysis because I felt that a simple observation would have allowed me, as an outside observer, to be able to make suggestions regarding roles that needed to be filled in this team. More specifically, I would have been able to identify those that were taking on individual roles instead of task roles. Once the equipment purchase was made, these team members would return to their previous roles as sign manufacturers. Due to this fact, it is unlikely that a formal analysis would have been any more beneficial than an informal one. The most important task was to get the team focused on a specific goal and get the discussion moving forward.

A second intervention that I had proposed was to create and implement a series of norms for the team to follow. More specifically, I wanted to establish norms that would be unique to the team given the task they were presented with. As research points out, group norms are among the key factors that have a considerable effect on the overall performance of a team (Høigaard et al., 2006). This team is composed of a company owner and a team of sign fabricators, so I saw it as
unlikely for this team to have established effective norms that would benefit them in their role as equipment purchasers. Establishing norms helps a group reduce conflict by stating how members should act as individuals and towards one another (Franz, 2012). Additionally, when members have different expectations, conflicts may arise (Franz, 2012). In reality, group norms can counteract conflict by stabilizing the structure of group or team (Høigaard et al., 2006). The overall goal here was to establish a set of ground rules for the team to follow. Setting norms gave the team purpose by asking them to evaluate why they had convened and what they had hoped to accomplish.

Another issue that I had identified was the fact that the company owner had plans to meet with off-site equipment vendors during some of the scheduled team meeting times. The company owner needed to remain a part of the decision making process, so I had proposed the intervention of collaborating with the fabrication team via teleconferencing. Teleconferencing is an example of virtual teamwork. One of the benefits of working virtually is that it allows the team to function even if one, or more, of the members is not present (Franz, 2012). In this case, the owner of the company was able to virtually take part in team meetings through the use of teleconferencing. Research will support that teams are generally more satisfied with the results of face-to-face communication (Chen & Kyaw-Phyo, 2012). In this case, the majority of the team still ended up meeting face-to-face. The only exception to this was the owner who only needed to utilize teleconferencing when meeting off-site with equipment vendors. Certain social cues become absent when utilizing electronic communications (Chen & Kyaw-Phyo, 2013). Unlike in an email or a text message, the owner would have still been able to generate certain social cues and tone since he was still using his voice to communicate with the rest of the team.
Follow-up

I had returned to the sign company approximately one month after my initial visit. I had first met with the company owner to discuss the outcome of the team. He explained that he had ended up purchasing a lower cost vinyl cutter at the request of the team. During the process, every member of the team, including the company’s owner, had shifted from individual roles to task roles. The owner, with little fabrication experience, took on the role of an information seeker. This allowed him to better understand the needs experienced during the sign fabrication process. The team also consisted of an evaluator/critic that helped the team compare the features of various machines with the services offered by the shop. An appointed recorder kept detailed notes regarding the team’s opinion for each the machines being evaluated.

The only real problem that ended up surfacing during the process surrounded the utilization of teleconferencing. The company was equipped with a digital speakerphone, but the owner had used a mobile phone to participate in the conference call while he was meeting with the vendor. Poor cellular service led to a short delay in one of the team’s meetings. The owner was forced to locate a landline phone to use for the conference call.
References


