USING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS A STRATEGY TO ACCELERATE TEAM BUILDING ON SITE

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ABSTRACT

Current team building models has been designed using traditional organization development practices, which has not been proven to be effective for accelerating the process of team formation. Therefore, we designed a study aimed to contrast two different strategies of team development, in order to compare their capacity to speed up the process of team building on-site. The first strategy was based on the traditional team building approach and the second was based on appreciative inquiry (AI), which is a strength-based process of organizational development and change. We used grounded theory methods to conduct a systematic comparison of 10 construction project teams, which were randomly assigned to either the strength-based team development intervention (based on AI) or to the traditional one (based on Dyer' model of team building). Data collected from three different sources (face-to-face interviews, field notes and observations) provided strong evidence that the strength-based process of team development is better to accelerate the process of team formation, especially at the early stages of a construction project. To consolidate the outcomes of this study, we created a strength-based model of team development (called P-ICIA), which offers some interesting insights to enrich team development research and practice.

KEYWORDS

Team building, appreciative inquiry, strength-based change, trust, collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Experience has shown that there is a direct relationship between the final outcome of a project and the capacity/quality of the project management team (Dainty, Cheng and Moore, 2005; Pavez, 2007). Therefore, organizations have created a growing need to thoroughly understand team design, interaction and development (Klein et al., 2009; Millhiser, Coen and Solow, 2011).

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Currently, team development has become a recognized technique in the field of organizational development (French and Bell, 2001), which accounts for its permanent use by consultants, scholars and researchers. Team development interventions have evolved from an approach focused on solving problems (traditional model) to the study of exceptional performances, which promote the development of social systems through the enhancement and cultivation of strengths (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008). Given the differences between traditional and positive forms of team development, this research has been designed to compare the capacity of both models to speed up the process of team building on-site. To accomplish that goal, we used grounded theory methods (Glaser and Strauss, 2009) to carry out a systematic comparison of 10 construction project teams, which are part of a group of Chilean construction companies that currently conducts research in partnership with the *Centro de Excelencia en Gestión de Producción de la Pontificia Universidad Católica* (GEPUC) [Center for Excellence in Production Management at Pontifical Catholic University of Chile]. Those teams were randomly assigned to either the strength-based team development intervention (based on appreciative inquiry) (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Whitney et al., 2004) or to the traditional one (based on Dyer' model of team building) (Dyer, 1987).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Team building has been described as one of the most popular intervention techniques in the field of organization development (OD) (Buller and Bell, 1986; Klein et al., 2009; Salas, Rozell, Mullen and Driskell, 1999). The main objective of a team building process is to increase the effectiveness of work teams. This is achieved by a process that allows team members effectively acquiring new skills and perceptions to produce a simultaneous change in interpersonal relations and performance (Buller and Bell, 1986).Team building embraces the central notion that enlisting the participation of team members in planning and implementing their own change will be more effective than simply imposing change on the team from outside (Salas et al., 1999). Thus, the foundation of the team building process is closely related to the principles that guide any OD intervention. A team building intervention has a clear methodological basis (specific steps) but the focus or the topics for change might vary based on the purpose of the process, the team composition (diversity of team members), the nature of the team (e.g. stable teams, temporary teams, or inter-organizational teams), and the context in which the intervention is carried out, among others (Klein et al., 2009).

Therefore, we selected team building approaches that were distinctive in terms of the process that characterize each methodology. Taking into account that criteria, we selected two models/approaches of team development: 1) Dyer's model of team building (Dyer, 1987; Dyer, Dyer and Dyer, 2013) and 2) the appreciative team building approach (Bushe and Coetzer, 1995; Whitney et al., 2004). We chose Dyer's model of team building because is the one that best resembles the classic mode of action-research (focused on problems). On the other hand, we chose the appreciative team building model because it proposes a new to way to addresses the process of team development, which is focused on leveraging the strengths of the social system.

DYER'S MODEL OF TEAM BUILDING

Dyer's model of team building is probably one of the best known approaches of team development under the problem-solving framework. This model is a great representation of the traditional mode of action-research, which starts with a diagnosis and ends with an evaluation of the main learnings and the effectiveness of the intervention (Susman and Evered, 1978). Grounded on the traditional approach of action research, Dyer's model of team building is described as follows: "Ordinarily a team-building program follows a cycle similar to that depicted in Figure 1.A. The program begins because someone recognizes a problem or problems. Either before or during the teambuilding effort, data are gathered to determine the root causes of the problem. The data are then analyzed, and a diagnosis is made of what is wrong and what is causing the problem. After the diagnosis, the team engages in appropriate planning and problem solving. Actions are planned and assignments made. The plans are then put into action and the results honestly evaluated."
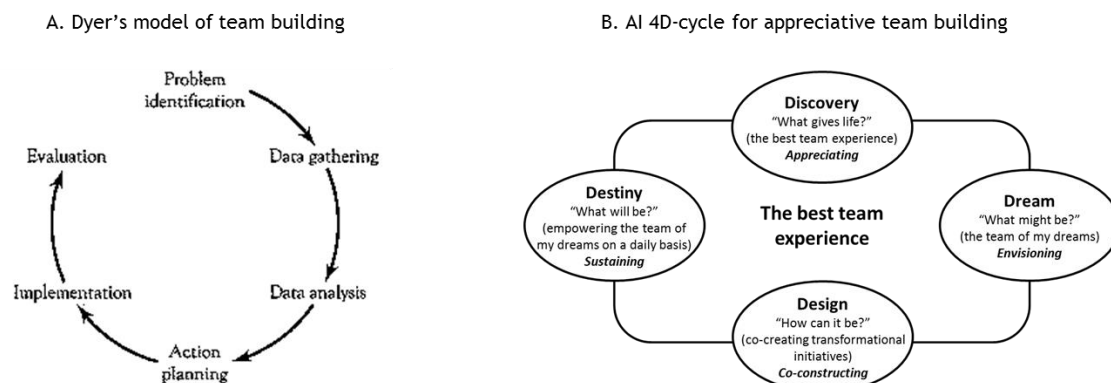
A. Dyer's model of team building   B. AI 4D-cycle for appreciative team building

Figure 1: The two approaches of team development.

APPRECIATIVE TEAM BUILDING

Appreciative team building (ATB) is an approach of team development grounded on the application of AI (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) as the methodological basis for change (Bushe and Coetzer, 1995; Whitney et al., 2004). AI is both a method of action research and a theory of how social systems develop and evolve, which rethinks the foundations of OD. In particular, it challenges the assumption that the purpose of an OD intervention is to solve a problem, because under that paradigm, groups and organizations are treated not only as if they have problems, but as if they are problems to be "solved." Instead, AI invites to rethink the practice of OD through the following question: What if, instead of seeing organizations as problems to be solved, we saw them as miracles to be appreciated? How would our methods of inquiry and our theories of organizing be different?. This re-formulation of the symbolic interpretation of social systems constitutes the basis of this new form of action-research which, stood on the shoulders of social constructionism, can be defined as "the cooperative co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. As a team building approach, AI embraces the premise that all teams have images of themselves that underlay self-organizing processes and that social systems have a natural tendency to evolve toward the most positive images held by their members (Bushe and Coetzer, 1995). Therefore, ATB can be defined as a praxis of collective action aimed to positively transform the team

to its most promising and positive future. From a practical standpoint ATB follows the traditional AI 4-D cycle (Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny – See Figure 1.B).

RESEARCH METHOD

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

The research questions central to this study is: How to accelerate the process of team formation on site? Based on those questions, this research has four main objectives: (1) To compare a traditional team building approach with a strength-based approach of team development; (2) To assess the effect of each approach into the process of team development; (3) To explore which approach is more effective for the process of team formation; and (4) To produce a model of team development that will help accelerating the process of team formation on site.

SAMPLE

The study was carried out with construction project teams belonging to 5 different Chilean medium-size construction companies. The unit of analysis was the construction project team and participants were people who belong to 10 different teams. The average size of a team varied from 5 to 14 people, based on the type and the stage of the construction project. The research was carried out at the construction site, in order to work with and observe teams in their natural setting. We selected 10 teams that embraced diversity in terms of the variables that might have a higher influence in team dynamics: type of construction project, type of contract, ownership of the project, project duration, project stage, and team performance. Then, we formed 5 pairs of teams that matched in one or more variables, in order to have similar groups of teams implementing the two types of intervention. After that, we used a randomized paired design for the intervention, which means that, within a pair, we randomly assigned one team to the strength-based team development cohort and one team to the problem-based (or traditional) team development cohort.

DATA COLLECTION

The research team collected data over a 4-month period, from April 2014 to July 2014 and consisted of field notes, face-to-face interviews and group observations. Field notes were focused on registering the activities and outcomes of each team development session. All team sessions were audio or video recorded, in order to have a complete record of the activities and outcomes of the intervention process. We implemented 5 sessions with each team, so we carried out 50 sessions in total (25 for each type of intervention). Data analyzed were equivalent to approximately 5345 minutes of team development work. Face-to-face interviews focused on eliciting lengthy narratives detailing participants' actions, thoughts, feelings, and social interactions that occurred to them during the team development process. Special effort was made to trigger vivid recollections of team members' experiences on each stage of the process; so one interview protocol was prepared for each team development intervention. Interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes and all of them were transcribed by the research team. We did 16 interviews for each methodology. Finally, group observations were used to generate data about team

interactions as they naturally occurred in each team development session. They were focused on the social dynamics deployed by teams during the intervention, including observer's interpretations based on the analysis of the body language and other emotional expressions. We produced full observation records of 4 randomly selected teams (2 teams per intervention method). Each team was observed using the same observation protocol, which was focused on perceived power distance, positive and negative interactions, team member roles, and group norms.

DATA ANALYSIS

The audio recording for each interview and the video/audio recording for each session was reviewed multiple times, and each transcript was read repeatedly. The procedure of data analysis followed the four-stage procedure of grounded theory's constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 2009): (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category; (2) integrating categories and their properties; (3) delimiting the theory; and (4) writing the theory. During the first stage, all transcripts (field notes, interviews and observations) were first coded using "open-coding" techniques, which involve rigorous line-by-line examination of every transcript to identify "codable moments" or segments of text with potential research significance (Corbin and Strauss, 2007). This process resulted in the identification of 480 fragments of text that were sorted on the basis of similarity into 112 initial categories. After the open coding an initial codebook for each methodology was developed. The initial codebook of Dyer's methodology consisted of 18 categories, and the initial codebook of the ATB methodology consisted of 16 categories. The whole coding process was carried out collaboratively by the research team using Dedoose. See Pavez (2014), for a detailed description of categories and properties. Theory delimitation started to take place when underlying uniformities in the original set of categories and/or properties were discovered. Thus, we started to delimitate the theory by using a small set of higher-level concepts. In doing so, first-order codes were grouped according to their similarity and second-order codes (higher-level concepts) were created (Saldaña, 2012). Finally, theory formulation occurred in a developmental way. A continuing process of data analysis and literature review informed several adjustments of the initial conceptual model to provide theoretical support of discovered variables. Tacking back and forth between the data, research materials, literature, and the original conceptual model, a grounded theory of a model of team development that accelerates the process of team formation on site emerged.

FINDINGS

The goal of this study was to characterize a team development process that would help to accelerate the process of team formation on site. Data suggest that the ATB model works better than the traditional approach, because of three key findings related to group behavior which are described as follows:

PATTERN 1: A REVERSAL FOCUS OF GROUP NEEDS CONSIDERATION

Data coming from the analysis of the outcomes of every team meeting—which were focused on the dialogues, agreements and deliverables of every stage of the process—showed an interesting pattern. It was clear that instrumental (task-related) and expressive (interpersonal-related) needs were present in all teams and they tried to

fulfil both during the process of team development. However, the time when those needs appeared—which reflects the focus of team interactions during the intervention process—was different for both types of interventions.

Dyer's model of team development

During the initial stages of the problem-solving approach (problem identification and data collection) the team was primarily focused on task-related needs. This means that most conversations, interactions and the collective processes of sense-making, were focused on understanding some gaps in productivity, the availability of resources, the organization of the work, the planning process and/or the coordination among different work-groups. The analysis of those gaps was translated into key areas of work for each team, which repeatedly included: lack of good economic incentives, lack of organization and planning, lack of efficacy in team meetings, and the need for improvement in some relational dynamics (e.g. leadership, communication and decision making). As teams got to understand the root causes of the problems, the expressive (or socio-emotional) needs of the group emerged. This happened because teams had to deal with three important relational issues: acknowledging different viewpoints, managing conflicts, and generating agreement among team members. Finally, in order to solve their problems, teams had to create an action plan and then to implement it. At this stage of the process, the initiatives were mainly focused on solving the relational issues that prevented the team to get the desired results. Therefore, at the end of the process, the team was primarily oriented to address (and work on) its expressive needs.

Appreciative team building

During the ATB intervention the focus went in the opposite direction regarding the time frame in which instrumental and expressive needs were addressed. At the *discovery phase*, most stories about the best team experience were based on emotional memories about relationships, human values, recognition, friendship and individual valuation. Consequently, conversations were mostly focused on sharing and revealing expressive needs. During the *dream phase*, most images of the ideal future and/or the "ideal team" were based on rich narratives of team achievements and how they should approach work. Consequently, conversations focused more on sharing and revealing the instrumental needs of the team. At the *design phase*, each team worked on crafting a more concrete version of the desired future by devising one or two specific statements related to some important elements of team dynamics: 1) goals or purpose, 2) roles and responsibilities, 3) relationships, 4) procedures, 5) leadership, 6) team spirit, 7) productivity and performance, and 8) communication (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008; Whitney et al., 2004). At this phase, the focus was slightly oriented to instrumental needs, but it was possible to see more balance. This happened because teams integrated the main elements of both the best team experience (discovery) and the ideal team (dream). Finally, the *destiny phase* was dedicated to create and implement some change initiatives that would help the team reaching the ideal future. Here, teams included both instrumental and expressive needs (slightly loaded to instrumental needs). In summary, it was possible to observe that both methodologies went into opposite directions in terms of the time frame in which they addressed the expressive and instrumental needs of the team. The problem-solving approach started with great attention to instrumental needs and it

ended up shifting that focus to expressive needs. On the other hand, the ATB approach started by giving great attention to expressive needs, then it shifted to instrumental needs, and it ended up balancing both of them.

PATTERN 2: DISTINCTIVE DYNAMICS OF GROUP PROGRESSION

Data collected from interviews, which focused on eliciting lengthy narratives detailing participants' actions, thoughts, feelings, and social interactions that occurred to them during the team development process, showed another interesting pattern. The later stages of the coding process (second-order coding) naturally converged into a set of themes that progressively appeared during the team building process. This resembled what previous studies in this area has shown, which tell us that groups engage in an identifiable set of activities, during different periods of time, that can be categorized as stages or phases of group development (Tuckman, 1965; Miller, 2003).

The content and focus of team interactions, however, were different for both methodologies. Dyer's problem solving approach followed a very similar pattern compared to traditional team building models. This pattern can be characterized as restorative dynamics oriented to remove the problems that are blocking the development of the team. We called this pattern "fix to develop", because the team explored their major problems in detail and, after that, they developed the required skills to overcome those challenges together. On the other hand, the collection of team member experiences on each stage of the ATB process helped to observe a different pattern of group progression compared to the problem-solving approach. The main characteristic of this pattern was the nurturing dynamics of team interactions that propelled team development. We called this pattern "nurture to grow", because as teams moved along the ATB process, upward spirals of positive interactions helped the teams growing in the direction they wanted. During the process of data analysis, the codes naturally converged into four different, and unique, progressive stages when compared to the conventional models of group development. These stages were named illumination, connection, inspiration, and achievement. These stages represent the highest level of abstraction for the categories generated during the coding process; and each of them included well-defined properties (Corbin and Strauss, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 2009). Interestingly, in none of those stages conflict resolution appeared as central aspect of group development.

PATTERN 3: POSITIVITY AS THE ENGINE OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS

Analysis of the data showed that only one variable remained stable in both types of interventions. That variable was the positive affective tone of the team (PATT), which can be described as the shared pattern of consistent (or homogeneous) positive affective reactions (George, 1990). However, this only occurred during the ATB intervention. The PATT came out constantly and with great frequency during the process of analysis of each source of data. This helped to explain the upwards spirals of generative interactions that aided teams (under the ATB methodology) growing in the direction that they wanted.

As we previously stated, we called this dynamic "nurture to grow", because the team had to nourish itself to sustain the transformational energy that this process required. The nutrients of the system, in this case, were the positive emotions that the ATB intervention sparked on every team member; which were transformed into the

PATT trough the diffusion of those feelings. At the beginning, positivity was mainly sparked by the facilitator using the tools that AI provides (e.g. appreciative interview and visioning exercise). However, as the process continued, the team started to integrate that element into their natural encounters. Initially, focusing on the positive was something new for the team, but when they were able to understand and integrate those concepts, they started to leverage and intensify positivity as a tool to develop and grow as a team.

THE P-ICIA: A MODEL OF TEAM DEVELOPMENT THAT ACCELERATES THE PROCESS OF FORMATION ON SITE

This study contributes to understand team building as a generative phenomenon. In other words, as a process characterized by dynamics of excellence, appreciation and abundance; where the PATT is something regular and stable rather than exceptional. Moreover, our data suggest that these processes of team development works better for accelerating the process of team formation, because it eliminates the need for conflict and resolution (e.g. Tuckman's forming and storming stages) to reach the stage of "performing" (Tuckman, 1965) in a quicker way. This is particularly important for teams that have not previously worked together (as most construction project teams), because for that types of teams take longer to achieve the levels of trust that allow the emergence of good processes of feedback that characterize high performance (Bennis and Shepard, 1956; Tuckman, 1965; Miller, 2003).

This research provides interesting insights into the elements that might characterize a strength-based model of team development, which we propose that accelerates the process of team formation on site for three reasons. First, a strength-based team development approach starts by building strong relationships among team members (expressive needs) and uses that basis to accomplish the instrumental needs of the team (productivity, efficiency and performance). Second, the group progression is characterized by dynamics that nurture positive emotional states, rather than managing conflicts, to increase trust and collective efficacy. In particular, we suggest that a strength-based model of team development starts by *illuminating* the strengths of the team; then relationships are reinforced by increasing the levels of *connectivity*; after that, the team is *inspired* to work in its own transformational process and; finally, the group collectively implement developmental initiatives to *achieve* the desired future and to become the team of their dreams. Third, a strength-based model of team development uses positivity as the engine of the developmental process. This means that positive emotional states are sparked, diffused, and sustained over time to energize the team in its transformational endeavor. Based on the data collected during the process, we created a strength-based model of team development called P-ICIA (positive affect-P; illumination-I; connection-C; inspiration-I; achievement-A). The model is presented in Figure 2.
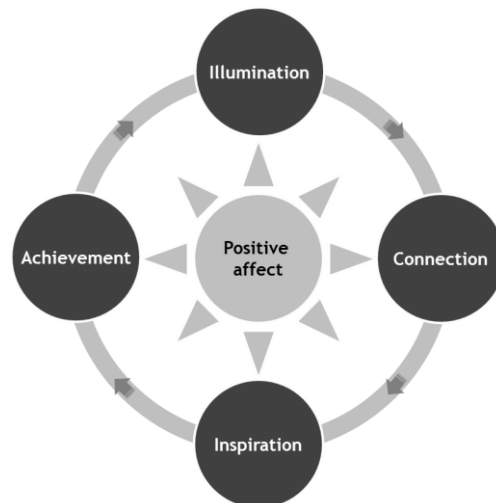
Figure 2: The P-ICIA model of strength-based team development (Pavez, 2014).

CONCLUSIONS

The results presented in this article show that there is a vast potential to improve the performance of construction project teams, which is simply wasted by not considering the team development process as a critical activity for project execution. This represents a latent opportunity for organizations where Lean is part of their strategies, because in these types of companies people are the key to success (Pavez, 2007). Based on lessons learned from the participants' experiences, some initiatives that can facilitate and/or improve teamwork at the construction site are the following: (1) Organizing work meetings with instances to execute team activities: As our study shows, this activities will have more impact on accelerating the process of team formation if they are carried out at early stages of the project and using a positive approach (i.e. ATB or similar); (2) Establishing structures and/or incentives that encourage the implementation of team development practices: This element strongly appeared when we talked to participants about how to sustain the level of teamwork that they reached as a consequence of the intervention process; and (3) Incorporating qualified professionals who can support team formation and development: This conclusion came out from the analysis that participants made about the role of the facilitator (researcher). Participants found value in having an external expert that would help the team to progress and to keep the focus on teamwork. Thus, they called for replicating this strategy at the beginning of each project, but ideally using internal staff. Finally, the main limitation of this study was the aim of studying the process of team development rather than its results.

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