Committee effectiveness in higher education:
The strengths and weaknesses of group decision making

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on five models of committee effectiveness for purposes of this assessment will lend insight into the strengths and weaknesses of utilizing a structured action plan as a guide to achieving and maintaining optimum committee effectiveness in higher education. In the compilation of the strengths and weaknesses of committee decision making, the group structure and purpose must be defined before a determination can be assessed on an applicable course of action that should be employed to achieve the objective. The appropriate use of strategy, structure and definition are required to build a successful team of individuals in collective thought and there must be clearly delineated membership accountability for the group to achieve functionality.

The models representing initiatives that can be utilized by group structures consisting of two or more individuals are defined and analyzed. The models being utilized in this analysis are; the Korn/Ferry T7 model, the Rubin, Plovnick and Fry GRPI model, the Katenbach and Smith-Team Basics model, the LaFasto and Larson Five Dynamics of Teamwork and Collaboration model, and the Lencioni-Understanding team Dysfunction model.

Keywords: Structure, Goals, Team, Leadership, Individual Roles, Effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

Committees, by the very mention of the appellation, have a tendency to evoke a negative response as their renowned reputation of getting nothing accomplished precedes them. Examining this perception objectively may ascertain the plausible strengths and weaknesses of committees and decision making in higher education.

Using the terms committee, group, or team interchangeably throughout by definition, describes a collection of two or more people who interact with one another in a way that influences each other. There are several topics of discourse being explored; are individuals more effective in decision making than a group or committee, are individuals more productive in the decision making process when participating within a committee structure than they are working independently; and what makes a committee more or less effective in decision making than the individual?

In academia being appointed or invited to join a committee is a prestigious privilege, and is also a key element of recognition and promotion, and in providing service to the university. Becoming part of a group hierarchy that has been formed with the intent to evaluate and make decisions based on a group purpose, can be an exciting proposition. This idealism creates a venue for individuals to be part of an initiative of progress and change, enjoining together with parties from different factions to collaborate, exchange ideas, share common goals, and formulate conclusions to issues through an academic lens. Sounds perfunctory, however where there is more than one individual involved, a definition of structure and purpose must be clearly defined or the basic premise of problem solving gets lost on the individual goal not the group collective, and can quickly evolve into a repetitive non-progressive effort.

In assessing the strengths and weaknesses of committee decision making in higher education, the research for this study was conducted by reviewing and analyzing articles and papers, and also considering personal experiences relating to this topic. One premise would surmise that groups are ineffective tools in decision making, the mission and structure usually being poorly defined and cumbersome, and the original goal becomes distorted in the operational methods used by the committee. Another viewed concept would suggest that individuals can be more effective than groups in product outflow (Baker, 1999). Using merged collaborative information from the five models exampled here indicates that when groups are properly structured with clear goals, mission, and objectives, a committee can be very effective and exceed the efforts of any one individual.

In the compilation of the strengths and weaknesses of committee decision making, certain key phrases and ideals come into play; structure, mission, team, goal setting, individual, group, leader, effectiveness, and the ultimate objective and expected longevity for the group. Sounding simple in theory, each part of the group structure and purpose must be clearly defined for the group to achieve functionality.

To support this rationale, the focus for purposes of this assessment, will be on five models of committee effectiveness (DeMeuse, 2007); the models include the Korn/Ferry T7 model, the Rubin, Plovnick and Fry - GRPI model, the Katzenbach and Smith Team Basics model, the LaFasto and Larson Five Dynamics of Teamwork and Collaboration model, and the Lencioni Understanding Team Dysfunction model. Although basically similar, each model contains different strategies for achieving committee effectiveness. Each model is discussed independently and then synthesized as a group.

FIVE MODELS OF COMMITTEE EFFECTIVENESS

The Korn/Ferry T7 model introduced in 2009 by Lombardo and Eichinger, consists of seven elements all starting with the letter "T" and segments the team into two environments; five internal factors and two external factors (DeMeuse, 2007). The internal factors include; Thrust or common purpose, Trust among teammates, Talent or collective skills, Teaming skills or efficiency as a team, and Test skills equaling getting the job done. The external factors are; Team leader fit or a leader who satisfies team needs, and Team support from the organization or the organizational culture enables the team.

Internally, group fragmentation can easily occur when the thrust and trust components of the internal factors are compromised. Thrust enables the committee to have a common objective or goal and is an important building block in the first step towards committee organization. The trust among team members is essential, but trust in the group leader is paramount, and of all the factors this is considered the most fragile component. The trust within a group can be circumvented with Dyadic side conversations or actions which creates an independent undercurrent, these behaviors can have a negative influence on the committee as a whole and cause factions or cliques. Since the influence of these factions or cliques within the group creates an event that will alter the trust of the group and induce fragmentation, a strong leader is required to eliminate this behavior and keep the group focused and purposeful (Swaab, 2008).

The GRPI model, which designates Goals, Roles, Processes, and Interpersonal Relationships proposed by Rubin, Plovnick and Fry in 1977, advocates that a committee's formation, for purposes of optimal effectiveness, should begin with a clear goal and these goals must be formed in concert with the objectives and strategies of the organization it serves (DeMeuse, 2007).

The first step establishes the goal by clarifying the purpose of the team, attaining group agreement on the results to be achieved, and determining the task. The second step assigns individual roles within the committee which is, but not limited to, clarifying and defining all members' roles and most importantly, designating and accepting a team leader. The third step determines the process of how decisions will be made by the committee, and the committee work process on procedures and work flow, the group agrees on procedures and are guided by the team leader. Based on these basics, the GRPI model assumes that the assignment of a clear goal and the understanding of the group's structure and purpose will facilitate a complete alignment of all other issues of the committee decision process.

The Katzenbach and Smith's Team Basics model established in 1993, concentrates on six questions that should be addressed in the effective order of basic teamwork. This asks if the size of the group is appropriate for the task; do team members have complementary skills in the initiative; is there a clearly defined purpose; are the team goals measurable and realistic; is there a properly communicated plan of approach; and is there a clear sense of mutual accountability (DeMeuse, 2007). The goals of the Katzenbach and Smith model focus on collective work products, personal growth, and performance results. This model relies heavily on interpersonal skills and communication with the idea that the group will come together with common purpose, understand their purpose, and make appropriate contributions to the committee.

The LaFasto and Larson's Five Dynamics of Teamwork and Collaboration model presented in 2001, identifies five dynamics of effective team collaboration; team members, team relationships, team problem solving, team leadership, and the organizational environment. This model asserts that all of these components must be clearly understood and actively managed in order for teamwork to lead to optimum committee success. The interaction of personal inter-

connected relationships within the committee are critical to the group, as these relationships make up crucial components of a successful committee (DeMeuse, 2007).

The Lencione Understanding Team Dysfunction model developed in 2005, defines the dysfunction of work teams using five points of dysfunction. This model states that all work teams have the potential to acquire any of these five dysfunctions; absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results (DeMeuse, 2007). The type and level of dysfunction needs to be understood and addressed individually, but if any of these conditions of team dysfunction are present, the team cannot effectively exist, and would require the introduction of a team facilitator to provide group cohesion and re-direction.

APPLICATIONS AND ANALYSIS

Although the models are presented in group or team generalities, these theories and methods are applicable to higher educational defined committee structures. The review of the five models suggested that there are three common denominators, presented in terms of importance; goals, leadership, and committee member interaction skills. The goal is predominantly the most important initial factor in committee development. A clear goal becomes the directive for the committee's purpose, this guides individual members into group roles, develops commitment, and eliminates confusion. Clearly stated goals and repeated clarification of the desired outcome enhances committee effort and optimum decision making. The importance of leadership is essential to any committee process, once the goal is established the leadership must provide stability and navigate the committee efforts moving them forward. The interaction skills of committee members must be monitored by the leadership to minimize individual domination and maintain the group's purpose (DeMeuse, 2007).

In researching the information and studies on committees and relating these structures to higher education committee formats, comparatively it is also found that these models relate to collective meeting structures used in the business world initiated in the early seventies, where the then, team meetings were referred to as department meetings and were the first attempt at establishing team performance in the workplace. The attendees of these meetings, by contrast to committees in higher education, were not there by appointment or by invitation, they were mandatory meetings for all department employees. The meetings were conducted by an issuance of an order to assemble, usually in memo form, and the meetings were typically held at a very inconvenient time as a show of power by the meeting leader. They were organized with a short agenda distributed at the beginning of each meeting, where individuals were assigned a task or project for review at the next meeting. These meetings have since evolved, as has the workplace, into more efficient uses of time, as time management in the workplace has become pivotal. As companies restructure, downsize, and re-invent themselves, the new roles being created tend to be team oriented and also the contemporary workplace uses teams as the basic work unit. As the world of business evolves so do the practices within organizations to promote efficiency and time management (Allen, 2000).

Considering the paradigm that the future of corporate and higher educational organizational success will rely on team effectiveness, the importance of the components that make a team successful is of primary concern, as is the concept that successful teams don't just happen, they are developed (Sundstrom, 1990). In order to develop properly, teams require a strong organizational structure and team leader that recognizes the importance of team effort and therefore encourages and supports it. From the team models being studied, the Korn/Ferry T7 model is advocated to be the most productive, and it is reiterated that although all the models

have merit, the Korn/Ferry T7 model gives the most comprehensive assessment of team success (DeMeuse, 2007).

The Korn/Ferry T7 model further advances the point that team success, and therefore corporate and organizational success, can be achieved by maximizing the framework of the internal and external factors. Developing a team's coherence and effectiveness can be cultivated and evaluated based on predetermined framework; functioning as a team is a learned and directed skill. While all organizations share in political motivations, in higher education the wheels of change are slightly more resistant and do not always promote conclusive committee decision making, allowing the political nature of the committee to take precedence and often lose sight of the initiative (Watts, 1999).

The study of these concepts can be applied to the context of university committee decision making. A cultural difference is noted in higher education in that being part of a committee, team, or group at the university level, members are appointed, elected or volunteer membership to serve the university, coalesced with a somewhat loose interpretation and correlation to the number of committees on which you serve as evidence of your commitment to the university and the mission. These beliefs can be so embedded in the culture of some universities that some faculty may belong to as many as twelve committees as part of their portfolio (Simplico, 2011).

In contrast, in a business environment it is not as distinctly driven by commitment to company as it is in a university environment. In a business environment you are more often automatically included in a group or team as part of a department, and only specially assigned to higher committees, and you display commitment to the company by mandatory participation.

University committees are categorized as either college or university-wide. The college committees address issues only pertinent to their individual school environments, while the university committees address issues affecting the university as a whole. This delineation causes the committee members to be very homogenous at the college level and non-homogenous at the university level, both can prove non-effective in the quest to better serve if not properly guided. An observation can be made that academics have difficulty functioning in an effective manner in group environments that lack structural definition and precise authority of leadership and purpose (Natemeyer, 2011).

Having had a relatively favorable experience when first joining the rank and file of higher education and being elected to five committees, some of which were considered the most prestigious and sought after, there was a fundamental philosophical change at the university level. All university committees were put under review for necessity and possible elimination. Subsequently, as elected Chairman of the Committee to Evaluate and Eliminate Committees, there was a new vantage point of observation at the committee level. Upon initial review in this newly appointed position, a preliminary assessment was made based on available information regarding committee contributions and productivity. It was determined that approximately 80% of the standing committees could be dissolved with little notice. There might be diminishing email correspondence rescheduling respective meeting dates, as committees have the propensity to do, but other than that, no undulation. No one welcomed their committee's evaluation, so any valuable data was difficult to ascertain for a more in depth analysis and as a result, the Committee to Evaluate and Eliminate Committees was eliminated, and ironically was to be the only committee eliminated.

The size of a group can change the dynamics and components and is a negative with most committees over twelve members. Larger groups, used in an evaluation were found to be lacking

defined task structure, where the communication structure was concise and constant, rendering them basically non-effective (Wagner, 2010). Group diversity, especially at the university level, becomes incompatible in purpose as faculty from all disciplines are enlisted on the same committees. This creates and perpetuates an overriding individual motivation that takes precedent over the group goal, the motivation for one's own curriculum, the purpose and intention of the individuals membership on the committee, and the individuals longevity on the committee, are all factors that contribute in the evolution of the culture that can minimize the original purpose and intent of the committee (Watts, 1999).

Since a committee, group or team is defined as a collection of two or more people who interact together and influence each other to varying degrees, the individual committee members must identify themselves with certain characteristics, defining themselves as members and how they are defined by others as members. How do they identify with one another and engage interactively, are they participating in a system of interlocking roles by sharing common norms, do they pursue and share independent goals, do they feel that membership in the group is rewarding, having a collective perception of unity, would they stick together in confrontation with other groups (Wagner, 2010). Based on this premise, groups should contain all or most of the aforementioned characteristics to formulate a positive or negative group influence and determine if a group will be strong or weak and effective or non-effective in its decision making. Each of these characteristics must be individually considered after a definition of effectiveness is established in the following three areas;

Production Output

The product of the group's work must meet or exceed standards of quantity and quality defined by the organization. Group productivity is a measure of this product and the speed with which fast forming groups can accomplish their objectives is becoming ever more critical (Wagner, 2010).

Membership Satisfaction

Membership in the group must provide people with short term satisfaction and facilitate their long term growth and development. If it does not members will leave and the group will cease to exist. Furthermore, because how people feel about the group tends to be contagious, dissatisfaction within the group can spread quickly if it is not managed appropriately (Wagner 2010).

Capacity for Continued Cooperation and Adaptation

The interpersonal processes that the group uses to complete a task should maintain or enhance members' capacity to work together and adapt over time. Groups that are not able to learn from their experiences and adapt and cooperate with flexibility over time cannot remain viable (Wagner, 2010).

The concept that a groups' effectiveness is defined by the criteria of production output, member satisfaction, capacity for continued cooperation and adaptation leads to the conclusion that group design and formation are critical to group success. When presented with a problem or project, a committee decision and output should be greater than the individual's independent decision or output, if this element is not present there is no need for the committee, it would be counterproductive**.** If the potential for group problem solving can be exploited and if its

deficiencies can be avoided, it follows that group problem solving can attain a level of proficiency not ordinarily achieved (Maier, 1999).

Committee effectiveness should be viewed in relationship to the group assets versus the group liabilities. The total information or knowledge on a subject should be greater than any one individual's knowledge alone. Each person on the committee possesses a certain level some greater than others, however, the sum of all members should be greater than any individual. Regardless of the level of knowledge of the individual members, if properly organized and structured the committee should make a better decision than the individual alone. Conversely, committees can be ineffective when not organized or structured properly, resulting in the imbalance of solutions, individual domination, and conflicting secondary goals. Lack of leadership is typically lacking in this formation (Natemeyer, 2011).

In the simplest form, the way in which the group assets are used by strong leadership and formation, will determine the group's effectiveness. The decision of a group's effectiveness lies in its organization, format, and leadership. Each maker of these variables needs to be examined to determine their importance (Maier, 1999). The committee's need for integrative function can be explained by exploring the committee's assets and liabilities;

Assets

1. The greater sum total of knowledge and information which presents the idea that there is greater sum knowledge in the group, rather than any one individual in the group.
2. There are a greater number of approaches to the problem and each member of the committee may present a different path to a solution not biased by other influences.
3. Participation in problem solving increases acceptance. When committees solve a problem rather than an individual the solution is more readily accepted over individual solutions because the problem will not have to be sold to the committee, the committee was already part of the solution.
4. There is less chance of communication failures. Decision making by a committee should be an open process lessening communication failures (Maier, 1999).

Liabilities

1. Social Pressure, which can lead to ineffective decision making. This is brought about by committee members who feel pressure to conform to the committee decisions.
2. Valence or Solution, This leads to solutions that enter later in the process and will have little acceptance due to the process. This can lead to positive ideas never being discussed.
3. Individual Domination, This can occur when one individual, due to status, rank, or force of personality can dominate the committee process. This usually occurs when there is a leaderless committee or the committee has weak leadership (Maier, 1999).

Leadership

The position of leadership to a committee is critical. A committee by definition is a group of individuals and in order for this group to function in a cohesive and effective manner there must be an effective leader or facilitator. The leader guides the committee and resolves conflicts, their role and purpose is much more defined than group individuals. The leader needs to be accepted by the committee and the larger organization of which the committee is part of. Alternatively, a facilitator cultivates consciousness by using conversation and the reconciliation

process to hold the group together (Watts, 1999). Committees can sometimes require both a leader and a facilitator, depending on the nature and size of the group and the availability of the leader (Maier, 1999).

CONCLUSION

The strengths and weaknesses of committee decision making in higher education or more importantly a committee's effectiveness, depends on its organization. The common denominator evidenced throughout the reviewed materials, maintains that when a committee is first deemed to be necessary it should follow a basic set of organizational procedures to be effective, and that establishing and maintaining clear goals is imperative to the group initiative having a positive outcome. To do so, the committee must first establish a goal and that goal should be clearly defined and in concert with the mission or strategy of the organization. Secondly, the committee should appoint a strong leader or facilitator to control and direct the committee's activities, establishing specific and measurable production goals and time tables. The committee members' ideas and efforts need to be respected and recognized, and the committee's purpose needs to be fulfilled. The goal in group problem solving is to determine why it may not be possible for a rather small intimate group to establish a problem solving process that capitalizes upon the total pool of information and provides for great inter-stimulation of ideas without any loss of innovative creativity due to social restraints (Maier, 1999). It takes more effort to increase the chance for a committee's success than to ruin it, therefore effective committees do not just happen they are a result strong leadership, organization, nurturing and execution, and when properly organized and controlled can be very effective.

It could be argued that committees provide a bastion in which to avoid individual responsibility, where the committee decision is a group assignment and blame for any misstep can be shared by all if the outcome is not favorable. The committee furnishes a shared place to feel part of decision making without ultimate responsibility, where individuals can play a part in a collective effort sharing in a common goal and ultimately provide service to a larger entity, and yet remain individually unaccountable.

Conversely, the argument could be made, that an individual as part of a hierarchy, may choose not to carry the ultimate weight of individual responsibility of final decision making, and if they have the authority to do so, that individual may defer to a committee to bear that burden. A committee may also be used as a defacto delay tactic to detain a conclusion or solution and in some situations can keep resolution in a prolonged state of uncertainty.

The committee dynamic in higher education will always have competing values, hidden agendas, and personal objectives for varying reasons. Committees are created by organizations and assigned to individuals to carry out objectives, and even with clearly established genesis have the imminent potential to lose their definition and clarity by virtue of human nature, which is inherently unique and flawed. As could be exampled that when some groups are given even simple tasks, they can be lengthy in completion and difficult in procedure. It can be said that the task was simple but the people were complex.

Committees have a very important role in decision making in higher education and there is a recognized level of significance in their responsibility in effective decision making, as their roles in strategic planning, enrollment, assessment and development play a crucial part in the economic sustainability of their universities.

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