A Teambuilding Model for the Educational Leadership Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper on "best practice in research" is to present a teambuilding model based on action-research that could be utilized in an educational leadership program. Action-research was conducted over five semesters by a single instructor with 63 aspiring administrators. Instructors who engage in action-research try to improve their own teaching by learning with their students. There were 50 females and 13 males in 15 teams. The teambuilding model combined business and educational concepts, i.e. Katzenbach and Smith's (2003) business model with Senge's (l990) system's framework. Teams were set up utilizing Johnston and Dainton's (l997a, l997b) reflective Learning Connections Inventory© and reflective practice exercises. Even though three aspiring administrators withdrew from their teams and four teams appeared fragmented in regard to their team projects, students reported that the team model aided in the development of team skills and sharing leadership on teams.

Introduction and Background

According to Levine (2005), "the quality of preparation of the nation's school leaders ranges from 'inadequate to appalling.' University-based programs designed to prepare the next generation of educational leaders are not up to the task" (p.1). Levine suggests that aspiring administrators pursue a business degree in order to prepare for the role of educational leader. Levine's conclusion has caused heated debate and re-evaluation of the educational leadership knowledge base (Creighton, Harris, & Coleman, 2005). At a private university located in suburban New York, faculty from the schools of business and education conceived of an educational leadership master's degree program that integrates

business and education concepts in its knowledge base. For example, one of the educational leadership courses applies a teambuilding model that integrates the work of business and education theorists. The teambuilding model developed by the instructor combines business and educational learning concepts, i.e. Katzenbach and Smith's (2003) business team model with Senge's (l990) systems team learning framework in concert with Johnston's interactive learning model (l996, l998) and reflective practice exercises (Johnston, l996, l998; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004).

Currently, there has been an increase in utilizing team units (Kline, l999; Polzer, 2003). Even modern media sources like *The Apprentice* or *Surv*ivor feature teams and are achieving high ratings with the general public. Teams are not new, but what is new is their increased prevalence (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003; Kline, l999). But there seems to be a difference in the use of teams in business class settings compared to teams in educational class settings. The business team model emphasizes the task, job or performance primarily, while the educational team model emphasizes the development of values, such as cooperation, respect and teamwork (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003; Kline, 1999). According to Kline (l999), there is no unified team model, but team members seem to work better when they are cooperating with one another. Therefore, the need for a teambuilding model that combines task delivery with developing teambuilding skills seems evident.

Unfortunately, not all teams are successful; sometimes teams fail (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Marcellino, 2005b). Too often, faculty set up teams haphazardly without laying the structural foundation necessary to support teams in the university classroom (Barbour & Harrell, 2005; Bolton, 1999). A team does not evolve simply because an instructor places adults into a group and labels them a "team." It is recommended that teams be limited in

size, develop rules, have clearly defined goals, clarify roles for team members and focus on performance outcomes (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Katzenbach & Smith, 2003; Kline, l999; Marcellino, 2002, 2003; Polzer, 2003, Thompson, 2000). But when individuals interact on teams, team process problems may also develop, such as breakdowns in communication and individual team "tensions." (Katzenbach & Smith, l993; Kling, 2000, Lipnack & Stamps, l997; Marcellino, 2005b, Pacanowsky, l995; Thompson, 2000). The instructor, therefore, needs to become alerted to team process problems as well as team performance problems so that team members may be guided and coached toward their team units.

Statement of Goal and Purpose

The goal of this chapter is to outline "best practice in research" through the application of action-research in an educational leadership program. Action-research or putting theory into action in the classroom builds on the qualitative approach (Bogdan & Biklen, l998). Action-research is a foundational skill in this educational leadership program, largely because it embodies the relational process of constructivist learning that is central to administrative leadership (Lambert et al., 2002). While implementing the action-research model, the students' goal was to develop their team skills as they interacted and engaged in the team process (Marcellino, 2002, 2003). The instructor and action-researcher's goal was to enable aspiring administrators (n=63) to develop their team skills and apply a teambuilding model that integrated business and educational concepts.

Theoretical Framework

The teambuilding model that was developed by the instructor combined business and educational concepts, i.e. Katzenbach and Smith's (2003) business team model with Senge's (l990) system's team learning framework. Teams were set up utilizing Johnston

and Dainton's (l997a, l997b) reflective Learning Connections Inventory®. Reflective exercises were also applied based on the work of Johnston (l996, l998) and Osterman and Kottkamp (2004). The instructor felt the work of these scholars was compatible.

Action-Research Design, Activities, Methods and Assessment

The instructor and students in a graduate degree program applied action-research to an exploratory study of teams in five educational leadership courses at a private university. Mills' (2003) action-research model formed the basis of the design. Action-research according to Bogdan and Biklen (l998) builds on the qualitative approach. Instructors who engage in action-research try to improve their own teaching as they engage in discussions with their students that will aid their learning and the learning of the instructor. Reflection is an integral part of the action-research cycle. Academics posit that engaging in reflective practice leads to self-awareness, growth and professional improvement for instructors and adult students (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). The instructor sought to support students in developing their team skills and sought to develop an understanding of the evolving team process so that the teaching of the course could be improved (See Model A).

Participants

There were 11 participants (2 teams) in the first course, 17 participants (4 teams) in the second course, 11 participants (3 teams) in the third course, 15 participants (4 teams) in the fourth course and nine participants (2 teams) in the final course. Within the 15 teams, there were 50 females and 13 males participating.

Activities for Achieving the Goal

Activity #1: Students were assigned foundational readings from noted theorists so they would become familiar with the business team model (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003) as

well as gain familiarity with the systems oriented framework proposed by Senge (l990). Senge's model (l990) is applied in both business and educational settings. Students were also asked to visit the Let Me Learn website (http://www.letmelearn.org), which outlines Johnston's (l996, l998) learning precepts and the tenets of her interactive learning theory. Johnston's work has also been adopted in business and educational settings and her learning model is compatible with Senge's (l990).

Activity #2: Diverse teams (n=15) were set up utilizing the Learning Connections Inventory (LCI) © developed by Johnston and Dainton (l997a, l997b). Nationally and internationally validated, the inventory has test-retest reliability (Learning Connections Resources Website: http://www.LCRinfo.com) as well as content, construct, and predictive validity (Johnston & Dainton, 1997b). According to Johnston and Dainton, the inventory can help instructors and students develop an understanding of their own learning patterns as well as an understanding of their peers' learning patterns.

Individual learners are represented by the four learning patterns of sequence, precision, technical processing and confluence. The interaction of these four learning patterns defines the learner, the instructor and the approach to learning that takes place in the classroom (Johnston, 1996, 1998). The four learning patterns are defined as follows:

Sequential: the process of organizing, planning, seeking order and consistency;

Precise: the process of using information and words, detail-oriented, seeking confirmation of what is valid, right, and/or true;

Technical: the process of practical, active, autonomous problem-solving;

Confluent: the process of generating ideas, reading between the lines, and making connections, comfortable with taking risks, trying and failing and trying again, seeking to do it "my own way" (Silverberg, 2003).

Johnston's (l996, l998) research-based approach advises setting up teams according to learning pattern constructs. Diverse teams were set up with members who were

representative of leading by one of the four learning patterns. The instructor sought to set up diverse teams because they were thought to be more creative and could focus on problem-solving (Thompson, 2000). Individual scores and team scores (total scores in each learning pattern area and team mean scores) were distributed to all students. The instructor then attempted to guide team members toward initial team roles based on their preferred or lead learning pattern. For example, a sequential learner was asked to become the initial team organizer; a precise learner was asked to become the team's initial communicator; the technical learner was asked to become the team problem-solver and the confluent learner was asked to become the team challenger or initial idea-generator (Marcellino, 2005a).

Activity # 3: A communication support structure was set up for the teams. E-mail addresses were exchanged among team members and *Blackboard* discussion groups and *Blackboard* teams were set up. The *Blackboard teams* had only the students interacting. The instructor chose not to have access to the *Blackboard* teams because the thought was to give each team access to privacy and enable team members to freely communicate and identify with one another as team members. The instructor distributed a list of suggested team tips, such as "make sure every team member is part of the communication process." The instructor also described possible team problems for team members to be alerted to, such as communication breakdowns, team member withdrawal, product fragmentation etc.

Activity #4: After diverse teams were formulated, an outline of a team contract was distributed to students, which enabled students to focus on the team product or performance outcomes as well as the team process that would be evolving. The contract outline included team goals, rules, proposed meetings as well as product and process outcomes (Aranda, Aranda & Conlon, l998). Team members engaged in discussions of individual team

assumptions and negotiated these in their team contracts. Team members were asked to sign their team contract when agreement was reached. Each team member received a copy of the contract for future referral and reference. Students were initially asked to return their contracts in a week's time, but some teams extended the time span to two or three weeks. When completed, team contracts were compared.

Activity #5: According to Mills (2003), in action-research, instructor and students engage in a four point process of 1) focusing on a theme (in this case, the application of a teambuilding model, 2) data collection, 3) data analysis, and 4) the development of an action plan (i.e. for the students, developing a team topic and learning about the team process; i.e. for the instructor, a possible revision of the action plan or syllabus). Within the 15 teams, students conducted research on two levels, namely, they researched a team topic and they researched the team process that evolved. Teams were asked to investigate an educational problem and develop policy initiatives for that problem. Teams presented their initiative technologically to their peers for evaluation (Topping, l998) and also developed a follow-up team policy paper, which outlined their initiatives.

Activity #6: Reflective exercises were applied that were suggested by Johnston (l996, l998) and Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) in order to allow participants to interact and come to an understanding of their team members. For example, students shared their background or autobiographies. Students also shared their educational or management platforms with one another for evaluation. These platforms were compared and students were offered suggestions for improvement by their peers (Topping, l998). Team trust exercises were also applied to enable students to become comfortable with one another.

Activity #7: Students provided the instructor with periodic updates in-person or e-mail regarding the team process as it evolved. Follow-up discussion involving the team product and the team process also evolved in person, on e-mail and on the *Blackboard* network. The instructor monitored the team process and applied instructional coaching when alerted by team members to team tensions or a possible team problem.

Activity #8: As final activities, students evaluated the team process and one another in an evaluative team questionnaire. In a summative reflective team essay, individual team members summarized what they had learned about the team process based on their interactions with their team members. This activity enables the instructor to gain multiple perspectives on the team process. Each team and team member tells a story that adds to the instructor's perspective as a practitioner and action-researcher.

Methods and Assessment Process

Assessment was based on self, peer (Topping, l998) and instructor evaluation. Because this was an action-research study, methods were triangulated to insure trustworthiness and credibility of the data (Mills, 2003). The methods became the data sources and assessment was based on these sources. Methods included periodic updates from team members in-person, by e-mail or *Blackboard*, pre-tested evaluative questionnaires, reflective exercises and summative essays. Selected interviews were conducted as a follow-up after a course ended. Data was analyzed for themes and surprises (Miles & Huberman, l994). A coding/categorization process was developed that analyzed the uniqueness of an item, its applicability to teams and its relevance to the team process.

Discussion, Findings and Results

The main question asked by the instructor was: Can a teambuilding model (derived from business and education theorists) be applied in the educational leadership classroom? A majority of the participants (60) reported that the teambuilding model, which included both business and educational concepts, widened their knowledge base in regard to business (task completion) and educational (values) team concepts. For example, one team member stated, "we valued each contribution that was made and enhanced each other in the process. We enjoyed each other's company, but most importantly, we accomplished our task." A number of themes emerged, namely,

Theme: Appreciating Diversity in Learning through Team Interaction

Students reported that the instructor's suggestion of initial team roles based on individual learning patterns helped team members expedite a team focus. One student stated, "people worked on tasks that matched their strengths and relied on others to take on tasks that they might not have been as skilled in doing." Students reported that they developed an appreciation of their own learning pattern as well as the diverse learning patterns of their team members. For example, student comments included,

- I now see that when a team is comprised of people with different learning patterns, more seems to get done.

-The learning patterns helped me to understand why my team members acted the way they did.

- It makes sense to know people's learning patterns; it gives us a chance to look through a lens of people's strengths or preferences.

- Their patterns became so much a part of their personality that at times I felt as if I were reacting to patterns and not people.

Furthermore, students came to value the diversity of their team members within the team context. Students stated,

- I am in awe of my team members and their creativity. [One team member] especially has the ability to think out of the box. Creatively, we pushed ourselves in a technological direction because of her.

- I never would have come up with those creative ideas by myself; [two of my team members] made certain things happen that I would not have initiated working alone.

- I am very sequential and organized in my thoughts. If things aren't structured and certain than I can't function at my best. When alone, I tend to make it more intense and this project helped me to learn more about others and enjoy myself too."

Theme: Taking the Time to Reflect about the Team Process

Furthermore, students indicated that taking the time to interact in teams helped them develop their team skills and learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the team process. One student commented, "The team experience was enlightening and helpful in so far as it showed me how to approach tasks in a positive way and learn to allow others to use their strengths to accomplish goals." Team members stated that they shared responsibilities and leadership on their teams. Students viewed the sharing of leadership as a team strength. For example, students claimed,

- We shared leadership and each one of us had a chance to be the driving force. We valued each other.

- Four of us took turns at leadership. . . this was a good thing.

- I believe with each task or topic that was discussed, a new leader arose. The individual who emerged as leader was the person whose strength addressed the task or topic at hand.

Some students indicated that they adapted through reflection and the influence of their team members. One team member wrote:

- I began evaluating my own personality, needs and expectations and wondered how people would perceive my team qualities and skills. I was honest enough to know I was not perfect, but I was curious to see what imperfections would be most frustrating and bothersome to my team members. . .At one meeting, my team discussed

> my precise behavior and joked about my approach being somewhat obsessive. I acknowledged my first weakness observed by the team and realized that in the future, I must learn to work with people by being less stressed and projecting my anxiety onto others in order to get a job accomplished.

In contrast, one of her team members stated:

> - I felt like I was on *Survivor* because [one of my team members] needed to win everyone on her side about her ideas. I began to understand that this was just who [she] was. She needed everything to be perfect and although we all did, hers was more prominent. In the end, I learned to appreciate her style and way of doing things. As we combined to converse as a group, it became more personal and humorous. The load was no longer feeling heavy . . .we ultimately learned to share and create while maintaining our vision.

Theme: Learning About Teambuilding and Producing a Team Product

Students reported that they were able to widen their knowledge base about team units and complete their team task by developing accountability to the team. Not only did students emphasize task completion (business model), but they also began to value and appreciate the unique skills and abilities of their team members (education model). Team members commented,

> -The team was supportive, encouraging and fun to work with. We grew to care about each other and really know and enjoy each others' strengths, weaknesses and all that goes with it.
>
> -This was a positive learning experience because I learned that I didn't have to do it all by myself. I also learned to trust the expertise of other members of the team.
>
> -Overall, it was a positive learning experience. I would love to implement teaming at work.
>
> -I was pleased and satisfied with the results, my role on the team and the work of my team members.

Theme: Pulling Away from the Team

But difficulties also emerged on some teams, i.e. team tensions and team member withdrawal. All teams displayed evidence of team tensions; the so-called "successful" teams as well as the teams that had process problems. When team tensions were revealed to the instructor

beforehand, the instructor discussed the problem with individual team members and sought to have each team member analyze the team tension from an individual perspective. Team members were coached to first evaluate their own assumptions and perceptions about team units and team members by asking questions, like, "What could you have done differently?" and "What can you do to rectify this situation." Usually, team tensions were traced to individual differences in expectations concerning the team's productivity and the work of team members (Kling, 2000).

On three teams (Teams 5, 6 and 14), one team member withdrew from the team process. When this happened, the remaining team members (11) compensated for the "missing" team member and became more cohesive. In spite of the instructor's efforts or the efforts of team members to bring these team members back into the team, these individuals continuously withdrew. Because of this, the other team members felt they had not achieved team status as outlined by Katzenbach and Smith (2003) in their team performance graph (p. 84). They rated themselves as a "pseudo team" or a "potential team" rather than a "real team." In addition, the more precise learners on the team rated the team lower than the other team members because as one precise learner stated, "the team experience was not perfect."

In the second course, team members claimed to withdraw because of role confusion. Unfortunately, their roles were not clearly delineated on the teams and team roles were shared. The female team member on team 5 wrote, "I was confused about my role on this team." The male team member on team 6 stated, "I was not satisfied with my role on this team." In the final course, the female team member claimed, that her contributions "were not accepted by the others in the contract or the project."

Theme: Fragmented Products Are Traced to Team Contracts

Team contracts helped students formulate team rules, goals and focus on performance outcomes (Aranda, Aranda, & Conlon, l998). But sometimes, team process problems and team product problems could be traced to the team contracts if they were hurriedly conceived or did not include all team members in the construction of the contract. For example, one team member stated, "we spent more time on our team contract because we wanted to get it right." But on two teams (team 2 in the first course and team 8 in the third course), team members planned their team product as separate entities in their team contracts. Instead of presenting unified products (technological presentation and/or policy paper), it was clearly evident where one team member's work began and ended. On team two, this fragmentation was based on minimal interaction of team members. Students worked separately throughout the time allotted for the team project. Instead, of working on a unified project, they worked on their own individual projects under a loosely conceived team umbrella (Marcellino, 2005b).

On team eight, students did interact, but their product still resulted in fragmentation, which again could be traced to the team contract. In the case of team two, process was affected because there was limited team interaction, but in the case of team eight, students did interact and came to value one another's contributions. A team member on team 8 said, "even though we decided to work on our own from the beginning and our individual topics were stated in our team contract, we did interact and comment on one another's work."

On team 11 (fourth course) and team 15 (final course), team members had not intended to present a partially fragmented team product (presentation or paper). On team 11, students were able to present a unified team policy paper after receiving instructional coaching. On team 15, suggestions were presented to the students by the instructor in order

to submit a unified team paper. Students on both teams did not recheck or revisit their contracts to make sure that all contract stipulations were followed as outlined. Overall, students are reluctant to discuss team problems in an open class forum if team infractions appear contrary to team contract stipulations. Because of this, the instructor intentionally has students revisit their team contracts by questioning them in individual periodic updates. Each time, there were process and product problems, the instructor went back to the drawing board and made changes to the team model. The instructor now posts additional questions for discussion specifically dealing with the team contracts to the *Blackboard* network.

Conclusion and Recommendations

On all teams, there were students who tried to make the process work and tried to apply the guidelines suggested by the instructor and the team theorists (Johnston, 1996, 1998; Katzenbach & Smith, 2003; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Senge, 1990). The majority of students (60) reported a widening of their knowledge base in regard to the team process and in developing an appreciation for the unique skills and abilities of their team members. Students learned about the external process of producing a team product and the internal dynamics of the team process (Bolman & Deal, l997; Katzenbach & Smith, 2003; Kline, l999; Senge, l990). Moreover, team members on 8 (out of 15) teams indicated that they had become "real teams" or "high-performing teams" (Katzenbach & Smith, p.84).

Unfortunately, as indicated by team theorists, sometimes teams do not achieve all their goals or outcomes even with the best intentions (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Katzenbach & Smith, 2003; Kline, 1999; Senge, l990; Thompson, 2000). When this happened, students learned the pitfalls of teaming in regard to product and process development (Marcellino, 2005b). According to Mills (2003), "human beings,

however, are very complicated organisms, and compared with chemicals – and mice, for that matter – their behavior can be disorderly and fairly unpredictable (p.3)."

Because multiple perspectives were provided from team members, the instructor was able to learn from the team process that evolved. At the completion of each course, the instructor updated and made changes to the teambuilding model (See Model A). The instructor has learned to monitor the team process more diligently with more periodic updates so that team tensions can be lessened (Kling, 2000). In the future, after general discussion takes place in the classroom, the instructor posts additional questions on the *Blackboard* network so that additional information on a team's progress or a team's contract is rendered. Moreover, the instructor has learned to limit the size of teams to four members to prevent role confusion in order to prevent withdrawal of team members. But based on a particular course's enrollment, this is not always possible. When there is a fifth team member, a fifth team role is recommended, which is initial team facilitator. Six member teams are no longer considered viable options. The instructor's preference is to create three member teams with all team members sharing the least preferred team role. When team members perform a role initially on a team, they seem to identify more readily with the team.

The application of a learning model that focuses on learning patterns (Johnston, 1996, 1998) and the LCI© may help educational professionals (including university professors and aspiring educational administrators) increase their own learning and their awareness about the learning of others. By focusing on a new category of learning differences as represented by the diversity in learning patterns, perhaps the "old" categories of individual physical and cultural differences based on age, race, ethnicity or gender may be minimized or overridden.

The cooperative education model was originally implemented to ease racial differences (Stewart, l982), perhaps Johnston's interactive learning model can do the same by creating a new non-threatening category of differences, i.e. the diversity of learning patterns.

Students came into this leadership course with their own personal mastery; they shared a vision and many were able to experience collective team learning (Senge, l990). Hopefully, students will continue to engage in reflective practice and examine their assumptions and mental models concerning the team process. Learning about leadership and teambuilding is a process that is not easily accomplished in a semester. It is a process that hopefully will continue to evolve as these aspiring educational leaders continue to perfect their craft on-the-job by interacting and collaborating in teams with school stakeholders – teachers, administrators, staff personnel, parents, community representatives and students.

While business and education share a common theoretical knowledge base, the application of the methods and techniques of implementation in regard to teams are different. This should not be. Because people working within business and educational organizations today must continually adapt and change, there is a need to emphasize, balance and fuse both models. The business team performance model works positively when teamwork and cooperation are injected into the equation. The educational model functions positively when performance is stressed. Both disciplines should strive for a balance between performing the task effectively and developing cooperative and collaborative team members. The application of a teambuilding model based on business and educational concepts seems especially useful in broadening the knowledge base of aspiring administrators.

Research Significance

The presentation of a teambuilding model that combines business and educational concepts based on the results of this action-research study may widen the knowledge base of educational leadership instructors who utilize teams in the educational leadership classroom. Even though the instructor's teambuilding is still evolving with each action-research iteration, aspects of this model may be adapted to various classroom disciplines.

In addition, presentation of the results of this action-research study may add to the concept of sharing leadership on teams. The concept of sharing leadership on teams is currently an emerging area of research (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Previous research on team leadership focused on the individual leader within the team, rather than sharing leadership on teams.

Model A: Team Building Model

PROBLEMS

Universal:

Communication Breakdown and Team Tensions

Process Problem:
Withdrawal of Team Members

Product Problem:
Fragmentation of Team Products

Team Performance:
Team Project (Policy Initiative based on 1 Unified Team Paper & Unified Technological Presentation)

Fully explain the Difference between Fragmented and Unified Team Products.

GOALS: STUDENT and INSTRUCTOR

Apply a business & educational teambuilding model to gain skills in team performance and team process development.

Learn about the team process from students and redesign syllabus or "action plan" based on student feedback.

Activities:

1. Foundational Readings (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003; Senge l990).
   - Visit Let Me Learn /LCI© Websites (Johnston, l996, l998; Johnston & Dainton, l997a, l997b).
2. Teams Structured With LCI©
   - Guide team members toward initial team roles based on learning patterns.
   - *Limit Size to 4 members (if possible for clarity of roles).
3. Establish a Communication/Trust Support Structure
   - E-mail Messaging
   - **Blackboard* Discussion Groups
   - Team trust Exercises
4. Team Contracts
   - *More time spent on team contracts and team assumptions before contracts are signed to prevent contractual problems.
   - *Signing of Team Contracts (Aranda, Aranda & Conlon, l998)
   - *More time spent on Discussion & Comparison of Team Contracts
5. Team Presentation & Policy Papers
6. Reflective Exercises (Johnston, l996, l998; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004).
   - Shared Management Platforms
7. Periodic Updates
8. Peer evaluative questionnaires and Summative Reflective Team Process Essays.

Team Process:
Interaction and communication of all team members with positive team closure.

*Instructor monitors the team process through periodic updates and tries to apply instructional coaching to prevent team member withdrawal when alerted.

***General discussion questions posted to the *Blackboard* network regarding team contracts and the team process.**

Bold Lettering indicates Recent Changes.
*Indicates Past Revisions to the model.

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