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Alignment between theory and practice in group development processes in the workplace: an experiential perspective

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the alignment between group processes theory and practice from an experiential perspective in a South African work context. Training and development programmes focus on groups and teams to improve performance. The perspective of this study was that training and development programmes should develop teams within a life paradigm. Participants were 13 university graduates who held various positions in organisations. All participants were recruited from Johannesburg, were female and ages ranged from 24 to 31 years. A questionnaire developed for this study based on Wheelan`s integrative model of group development was used to collect information from participants. The snowballing method was used to access participants. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data. The results revealed that theory was aligned to group training experience in organisations. Future studies could assess team-building initiatives and effectiveness at each stage of group development.

Introduction

Group development processes in the workplace take various forms and this depends on the size of the organisation and nature of work performed by employees. Some work groups function optimally while others become dysfunctional and do not reach maturity. The work group goes through a developmental process marked by stages of development such as dependency and inclusion, counter-dependency and fight, trust and structure, work and termination (Wheelan, 2005). Wheelan`s integrated model of group development or the integrative model of group development was used in this study to assess the behaviour of employees in teams and groups in the workplace. The study used an experiential method in which participants qualitatively reported the alignment between theory and practice in group processes in the workplace. The results of the study showed that Wheelan`s integrative model of group development is applicable to the South African workplace with respect to team building and performance.

Review of literature

The integrative model of group development is related to other theories of group development such as sequential models, cyclic models, life cycle models, equilibrium models and adaptive or non-sequential models (Wheelan, 2005). Sequential models of group development advocate that groups develop through an orderly or predictable fashion until the last stage of development is reached (Johnson & Johnson, 2014). Cyclic models of group development regard group development as revolving around recurrent issues to such an extent that the group is either working or attending to disruptive negative emotions within it (Fransen, Weinberger, & Kirschner, 2013). Life cycle models view group development in life stages resembling birth, development, maturity and death (Wheelan, 2005). Equilibrium models postulate that groups vacillate between stability and turbulence. They strive to achieve stability and sometimes the group experiences rapid or abrupt change after periods of stagnation (Fransen et al., 2013). The adaptive or non-sequential models posit that group development is based on the ability of the group to resolve internal and external contingencies and demands on the group (Wheelan, 2005). The nature of tasks to be performed and deadlines given for the group to meet its target influence group development (Fransen et al., 2013). Environmental forces and unforeseen internal strife within a group could retard development. The ideas from various theoretical approaches have been fused into Wheelan`s integrative model of group development which is a life cycle model first proposed in 1990. This study, assessing the behaviour of employees in teams and groups in the workplace, is based on Wheelan`s integrative model of group development.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to assess the alignment between theory and practice in group development processes in the workplace based on Wheelan`s integrative model of group development. Participants were required to match the theoretical provisions of the model with their lived experiences in the workplace.

Research question

The specific research question for this study was: Are the stages of group development proposed in Wheelan`s integrative model of group development experienced in the South African workplace?

Method

Participants and setting

Participants were a convenience sample of 13 graduates who studied group processes theories at university. They were recruited from Johannesburg through a snowball sampling method. All participants were female, with ages ranging from 24 to 31 years. Participants had postgraduate degrees in Industrial/Organisational Psychology: eight (61.5%) had a Master`s degree and five (38.5%) an Honours degree. Participants had

work experience in operations management, consulting and human resource management. There were two (15.4%) intern industrial psychologists and two (15.4%) industrial psychologists.

Theoretical dimensions of Wheelan`s integrative model of group development were used by participants to assess the occurrence of group development stages in the workplace. The theoretical aspects were provided in the questionnaire sent to participants. Participants assessed the alignment between the theoretical aspects of the Wheelan`s integrative model of group development and work practice with particular reference to their experience in the workplace.

Eligibility to participate in the study required having enrolled for and completed the group processes module or group dynamics course at postgraduate level. Work experience pertaining to working with others in groups such as non-governmental organisations, public service and private companies after completing the postgraduate degree was required. A university enrolment register and class attendance register were used to verify the authenticity of having studied group dynamics at either Honours or Masters Level.

Research instrument

A questionnaire developed for this study followed the guidelines given by Wheelan (2005) on the behaviour of group members at each stage of group development. The content validity of the questionnaire was judged by three experts in group dynamics. It was piloted on a small voluntary association to assess the alignment between the theoretical stages of group development and the behaviour of group members in practice. The results of the pilot study showed that Wheelan`s integrative model of group development was suitable for use in this study.

Data collection and procedure

Ethics clearance was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand before data collection commenced. Participants were provided with the theoretical aspects of Wheelan`s integrative model of group development. They completed the questionnaire individually, describing their experience working with groups and teams in the workplace. They returned the completed questionnaire electronically. Participants gave consent and voluntarily participated in the study. Credibility and trustworthiness of responses were verified by way of reference to the tenets of Wheelan`s integrative model of group development and through triangulation.

Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to identify themes that emerged at each level of group development identified in the workplace. Analysing responses of participants qualitatively allows for an in-depth analysis of participants` perspectives (Atieh, Morgaine, & Duncan, 2016). The themes were identified, grouped and named according to stages of group development. Theme development phases assessed in data analysis were initialisation, construction, rectification, and finalisation (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen,

& Snelgrove, 2016). Initialisation involves reading the transcript, highlighting meaning, reflecting on the meaning, classifying and comparing data. Construction in theme development involves labelling, defining and describing, immersion and distancing (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Rectification is performed by relating themes to establish knowledge and stabilising the information gathered so that it makes sense. Finalisation is the process of developing the story line and making the meaning clearer. It implies synthesising the themes to gain an overall meaning of results (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Findings and discussion

The themes that emerged from data analysis based on Wheelan's group development stages highlighted the work-related behaviours experienced by participants. The first theme identified related to the behaviour of employees at group formation stage in which dependence on the leader and the need to be included in the group were predominant behaviours reported by participants in this study. The second theme centred on conflict. Preparation for work was a theme which addressed issues of reconciliation and reorientation towards work. The work theme showed team and group optimal performance. Termination was a theme that discussed group disbandment or team dissolution. Each of these themes are briefly discussed below together with supportive comments provided by some of participants in the study.

Theme 1: dependence on the leader and group members

Participants observed that the group joining stage involved dependency, loyalty and belonging to the group. Three of the participants outlined their experience in the following ways:

> As one starts employment, one is introduced to the team of employees that one will work with on a day-to-day basis. As a new member, you feel the need to fit in with the customs, norms and behaviour of the other employees. One also feels the need to take instructions from the manager with a lesser degree of independence. For example, you look up to the manager to give you tasks as well as instructions on how to do such tasks; especially unfamiliar tasks. When facing difficulties with a task given by the manager, as a new employee, there is some kind of fear to ask for clarity and instead, you look up to fellow colleagues to assist you complete the task. Thus, all what a new employee does initially is to try and make a good impression to the manager. (Participant 1: aged 24, Operations Management Assistant)

> I have observed this stage when I was a new member of a team, and every time a new member joins our team. There is a lot of dependency on others to find information about the work and to understand how everything runs in the team. There is also minimal disagreement among team members and with the line manager. At this stage, we view the leader as having no fault, and we try hard to please them. Tasks will be promptly completed with no questions asked; time is closely monitored, so there will be no late coming to work. I have found that this lasts for a few weeks to a month at most. (Participant 7: aged 24, Human Resources Generalist)

> As a fairly new professional within the field of industrial psychology, I have experienced dependency and inclusion. Two years ago as one of the fifteen interns, the focus of the group was to operate as a cohesive unit. While we had different interests and opinions, efforts were

made to reach consensus on project matters, to minimise disagreements and rather work together toward reaching common goals. As novice members within the organisation, we were dependent on the intern supervisor to guide and direct us, both with regard to the content and also with relationship-building. The organisation had strict rules of conduct; therefore, compliance was high with the organisational and group norms. It was important to make a good impression both as an individual and also as a member of the intern group. (Participant 8: aged 28, Industrial psychologist).

This study, therefore, confirms what previous studies have shown – that the formative stage of group development is characterised by dependency and inclusion (Wheelan, 2005). Group members depend on the leader and they fear being excluded from the group (Wheelan, 2016). Team members engage in impression management behaviours such as ingratiation and self-promotion to impress the leader (Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016). Relationships in the group during group or team formation stage are cordial and members are preoccupied with creating good impressions and pleasant manners and there is little attention towards work demands (Wheelan, 2005). There is no emphasis on individual differentiation and identification based on work performance (Baumeister, Ainsworth, & Vohs, 2016).

Theme 2: conflict

Participants indicated that this stage is marked by non-adherence to group norms and values and it is conflict-ridden. Ego protection and personal values exacerbate group conflict, as the following participants noted:

As one begins to understand the work and to receive positive feedback, one begins to have opinions that may sometimes question things which were previously accepted. One begins to form an idea of how the job given can have a reasonable structure according to what one was hired to do. This causes a dislike for one`s job, structures in place and even colleagues. One gets to know colleagues and to have favourite and least favourite colleagues. This is usually based on similarities shared with the colleagues. One gradually becomes annoyed with the least favourite co-worker, or even with the initial point of contact, the supervisor – thus building tension. If there is an opportunity for the supervisor to be of positive contribution to one's life, tension may be reduced. For example, if they recognise a personal struggle and they offer psychological support, the tension lessens and a closeness becomes evident. (Participant 2: aged 28, Junior Account Manager).

During this stage, a lot of the fights are based on ego and perceived professional standing. You find that when people fight in the group, it's not necessarily for the idea being challenged but rather about protecting one's ego and perceived professional standard. People feel upset when their point is rejected and feel that their professional judgment is not being respected. Because the fights are not about the topic at hand but about egos, it becomes more difficult to resolve. You find that the people with a natural inclination to lead then assume a leadership role to try and get the group to move on. The conflicts from this stage often affect the other stages and negative attitudes linger on. You find that even though an issue is resolved, the people involved in the conflict remain "bruised" and will easily revert to this stage when things are challenged later. (Participant 9: aged 24, Intern Industrial Psychologist)

I have also personally experienced this stage, when I was starting to internally question the kind of work I do. Comparisons start to emerge within the group when tasks and projects are distributed. Depending on the kind of leader, conflict arises either head-on through

> a conversation, or passive-aggressively through late submissions etc. How counter-dependence and conflict arise is largely affected by management style and personalities of subordinates. (Participant 7: aged 24, Human Resources Generalist)

Counter-dependency and fight is a stage in which members of the group start to show disgruntlement about their working conditions and the competence of their leader in relation to work. Again, the findings of this study show group conflict and divergence at this stage as postulated in the integrative model of group development (Wheelan, 2005). Conflict is based on values, goals, tasks, roles and diversity. Members challenge the leader and the organisation openly relying on union membership, affiliation to radical groups and the support of informal groups such as coalitions and subgroups (Roca, 2016).

Theme 3: preparation for work

The participants` responses indicated that after conflict, group members would realise that it is counter-productive and work has to be performed for the survival of the group. It was stated:

> I have noticed that, this stage usually occurs after counter-dependence and fight. Usually, it happens even though employees or group members are unaware of it, but mostly it is a conscious decision which is made by team member within a group to put their differences aside in an attempt to achieve the group`s objective. The realisation that fighting and arguing is time -consuming and affects the morale and effectiveness of the group, members build trust and structure. Acceptance of diversity of ideas and being tolerant of each other's differences lead to a much productive team. I have noticed that employees or groups at this stage are more effective, efficient, and the results are usually positive and there is less turnover, late coming or absenteeism. (Participant 6: aged 27, Human Resources Administration Manager)

> The new employees start to adapt to the organisation and they are now free to express their views and offer input instead of high dependence on the leader. They are now trusted by other employees to carry out tasks. Communication among team members improves although it remains a bit problematic for some members but group cohesion is evident. Employees who were previously scared during the conflict stage to share their views can now speak out in meetings and are free to complain if certain mechanisms were not working. Productivity starts to improve without asking for the leader's input all the time. (Participant 11: aged 24, Case Manager)

> Over time, trust begins to occur between group members when a common goal is evident. Here, everyone understands the other persons' strengths, and leverages on them through team work. Management style is also critical at this point, as alliances could be formed amongst team members or with the manager. Through team meetings, the team is able to understand what they are responsible for individually and as a team. Conflict arises when there is lack of role clarity among group members who are working on the same project. Depending on the severity of conflict, it is at this point that a member may consider or choose to resign from the company completely. (Participant 7: aged 24, Human Resources Generalist)

Preparation for work is a stage three phase of group development characterised by the need to resolve conflict and build trust and structure in the group. It was shown that participants in this study needed trust and structure to guide their work as covered in Wheelan`s integrative model of group development. Self-management in the teams improves as the team prepares for maximum performance (Powell & Pazos, 2017). Members seek to understand team goals, the tasks they are required to complete and the pressure to comply with organisational policies and procedures increases (Wheelan,

2016). The group realises that conflict is wasteful and would rather endeavour to put in place structures that expedite conflict resolution. Trust begins to develop among members and work is allocated according to members` individual abilities. Trust makes the team cohesive and effective (Yang, 2014).

Theme 4: work focus

It was pointed out by participants that the work stage exists as a distinct phase in which team performance is at its optimum. These participants` responses illustrate the point.

> The group can be said to be performing optimally and applying the rules, guidelines and standards. The processes established in the earlier stages to support the team will work optimally towards goal achievement at this stage. At this stage, the group is less susceptible to disruption, as such; new people who join or leave are less likely to disrupt performance. There is a move away from directive leadership to supportive or developmental leadership and problem solving is encouraged. Typical characteristics occurring here are: `We are really making a difference', 'We respect and help each other', `We celebrate some early wins' and `We are adding 'stretch' to our performance challenge'. (Participant 5: aged 25, Junior Consultant)

> Once the roles are assigned and accepted by each member of the group we work effectively to reach the desired goals. As the theory purports, open communication style in which all members participate and are heard gains priority. At this stage, it is really just about getting the work done. (Participant 9: aged 24, Intern Industrial Psychologist)

> When clarity of goals and roles occurs, depending on the lines of communication between the leader and group members, a group begins to create norms, such as `at a certain time we all go for lunch, or go home'. Norms of how we interact with clients are also created and adopted. This facilitates the development of a group culture. At this point we are more comfortable to break a problem down and honestly analyse it. We are more open with each other about what we struggle with, and are clear on which problems we can solve at ground level or need to be escalated to our leader. Conflict management is much better at this stage. I have found that internal conflict management is important at this stage, as not everyone may be ready to solve a conflict at the same time, but the work still needs to get done. At this point, we are clear that the work is important, and are able to look past petty conflicts. Depending on whether the relationship between the leader and employee is weak or strong, and whether the employee finds fulfilment in the work they do, they may make plans to leave, whilst doing their best to keep the work they are performing intact. (Participant 7: aged 24, Human Resources Generalist)

The work stage is the fourth phase of Wheelan`s integrative model of group development. This study revealed that employees at the work stage are performance-oriented and they are productive (Rao, 2016). Employees in teams show work behaviours such completing assigned tasks, clarifying goals, clarifying roles and taking on roles based on ability and not patronage with the leader (Wheelan, 2016). The team becomes effective by valuing constructive feedback, adopting an open communication style, implementing work plans and honest self-assessment (Wheelan, 2016).

Theme 5: termination

Participants acknowledged the existence of mixed feelings of despair and hope including prospects for the future during an impending or actual termination phase. They expressed these feelings in the following ways.

We are almost at the end of our internship contract in three months and it is already hard for the group to deal with the reality of the closely working group being dissolved. There are high levels of stress and anxiety about securing permanent employment. This is because of the close-knit working relationship we have already formed. However, termination of the contract is inevitable because the contract was set for a year. (Participant 3: aged 24, Intern Industrial Psychologist).

In the fourth quarter towards the end of the internship year, friendships had solidified, tasks had been duly completed and there was anticipation for the future. I felt happy and content with the work I had done and my achievements throughout the year. I gathered that others felt the same way about their experiences and we were all looking forward to meeting again at conferences. We maintained the various social media platforms we used to communicate throughout the internship year, such as the WhatsApp group, where we continue to post job opportunities and other valuable information to one another. (Participant 8: aged 28, Industrial Psychologist).

This is typically the debriefing and learning outcomes phase as the team adjourns. In this stage, the group engages in lessons learned and celebrates achievements. (Participant 5: aged 25, Junior Consultant).

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to assess the connection between theory and practice in group development processes with particular reference to Wheelan`s integrative model of group development. The alignment between theory and practice is sometimes difficult or impractical to ascertain but, in this study, participants established congruence through experiential learning in the workplace. Based on a sample of university graduates who studied group dynamics and expressed how the theory was aligned to practice, the results of the study offer an experiential dimension to group process theory and work behaviour in a South African context. The responses provided by the participants addressed the research question adequately in confirming the link between theory and practice in group processes. These findings, albeit based on only 13 recent graduates with limited work experience, reveal the link between theory and practice. Participants were able to identify clearly the discrete stages of group development during their work experience. The findings dispel the assertion that the existence of groups and group developmental stages in the workplace is more apparent than real. Future studies could investigate more deeply the actual team building efforts, team cohesion and effectiveness at each stage of group development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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