Reflective paper organisational dialogue

Huhtamaki – Reflective Paper During the interview, the Chief Executive Officer (Brad) and plant manager (Simon) devoted a considerable amount of time to our communication analysis of their plant. I hadn't expected two executives to become so involved with a University case study, and to discuss their credo, mission statements, strategies, and—of critical importance to me—internal communication strategy, in so much detail. Gerard & Ellinor (2001) stress that authentic leaders need to practise and execute dialogue, and to me, this was what Brad and Simon were doing: showing their authentic leadership through dialogue.

I thought this may have been purely for our benefit, but after four hours, beginning with introductory meetings and followed by interviews and a shop floor tour, it became apparent that management was striving to develop a learning culture. I began to understand that management is about creating an environment to communicate through different mediums: verbal and visual in varying forums; formal meetings, face-to-face meetings, and graphical representations of key messages on the shop floor and around the offices. This essay will reflect my case study experience of the role of dialogue as a tool within Huhtamaki for fostering dialogic communication and developing a learning culture within the organisation. Furthermore, I will highlight the limitations associated with dialogue and with resistive employees who refuse to engage. I had a preconceived idea that management would have a top-down hierarchal structure, with a ' closed door' communication policy based on research from Swink & Way (1995), Downs & Adrian (2004) and Clarke (2006).

On the contrary, I found management offered an ' open door' policy. For example, Brad and Simon understand that organisational effectiveness is dependent upon communication across subcultural boundaries. Therefore, they offer an open door policy, where any employee could approach them to discuss any issues without consequences. Given the traditional hierarchal structure of a typical manufacturing plant with leading hands, supervisors and union delegates, I thought allowing shop floor employees to communicate directly with management an unconventional approach.

Schein (1993) states that dialogue begins with creating a sense of equality, and this is what Brad and Simon are striving to achieve within their organisation. According to my understanding, they are creating an environment where employees feel comfortable in communicating, and moving away from the erstwhile problems associated with communication via union delegates, which has often caused industrial disputes and created subcultural differences between management and shop floor employees. Amy (2008) states in her research study that management needs to adopt an informal and approachable communication style. I found it interesting that this is the strategy that Brad and Simon have adopted to aid in changing the organisational culture. In order to move away from a ' them and us' attitude, they focused on creating an open, trusting environment which fosters learning.

Simon in particular encourages employees to be upfront, and to discuss problems or issues. However, he does not merely provide solutions: he fosters dialogic communication by engaging the employees with questions until they come to realise the answers themselves. I thought this might

create awkward situations if the employees could not find answers. But my concern was dismissed; Simon coaches and mentors employees to think about issues or mistakes, and ensures they develop a solution for themselves, thus creating a learning environment.

Management's ' open door' policy was not the only means for communication. Management scheduled a daily team meeting, weekly production meetings, and monthly ' tool box' meetings, where organisational issues were discussed in more detail. My first impression was that there were too many meetings. When would employees have time to get any work done, if they were continually involved in meetings with colleagues from different departments? I soon learned that this was a necessary step, as not all employees have access to email. Management has to rely on face-to-face verbal communication to ensure that messages are communicated, received, and most importantly, understood.

Furthermore, to communicate with employees with no access to email, management used the hallway between the cafeteria and shop floor as a ' communication corridor,' posting organisational information alongside safety, quality, production efficacy and operational information. I recall seeing very detailed graphs, charts and statistics, and wondered whether the average shop floor employee would be able to interpret and analyse this data. Simon stated that it was necessary to communicate the same messages continuously in order to engage employees, both verbally in meetings and visually around the work place. I discovered that during most meetings, unless an employee was directly involved in the conversation, he or she would not engage in dialogue. This concerned me; as Schein (1993)

states, leaders need to motivate to engage, as employees may not volunteer to engage in dialogue.

I now struggled to understand why was it so difficult to engage the employees in dialogue. They would not engage in dialogue during formal meetings and relied on informal face-to-face meetings, where quite often, they needed to be coached to engage in a two-way conversation to find solutions. I felt that management was providing every possible opportunity for employees to be able to communicate with employees, but nonetheless, a communication culture had not successfully been created. Gerard & Ellinor (2001) state that dialogue is not something that can be forced upon employees; they need to participate willingly, and if dialogue is introduced into a hostile environment, it can fail. I could see that management was creating a safe environment in which to communicate, but soon realised that other parts of the workplace provided a different type of ambience. Part of our communication analysis was a tour around the shop floor, and one of the first things I noticed was the difference in body language between various employees.

It was very evident as we walked past their workstations that some employees were open and approached management, while others ignored our presence, creating a feeling of tension. It was obvious that although management was trying to dilute the ' them and us' attitude, some employees were still bitter from past experiences of management. I now started to fully comprehend the views put forward by Gerard & Ellinor (2001): that dialogue is a tool that requires time and knowledge of the working process. It needs to grow within the organisation. Although Brad and

Simon have created a safe environment, they now need to focus on educating their employees in the process of dialogue and the benefits of dialogue in order to create a learning culture. Furthermore, I support the recommendations of Dixon (1998) for management to engage employees and involve them in the decision-making process.

I would expect the employees to thereby see their input as valid and valued; consequently, they would have a personal interest in creating a greater understanding of issues and solutions. In consideration of the fact that Simon has had some success with the ' open door' policy, and that Brown & Isaacs (1997) propose that learning is not happening during scheduled meetings or organised forums, but in less formal places, I still recommend developing dialogue during formal scheduled meetings. Management needs to focus on encouraging honest dialogue and transparency within formal meetings, as per Mazutis & Slawski (2009). I feel this is a valid point, as face-to-face meetings are limited to certain employees with whom management has good rapport. Employees who are resistive to change and still foster a ' them and us' attitude will simply not approach management.

I came to believe that Brad and Simon are authentic leaders, and have the capabilities to shape the culture of their organisation through dialogic communication. Reference List Amy H. Amy, 2008, ' Leaders as facilitators of individual and organizational learning', Leadership & Organization Development Journal, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 212? 234. Brown, J.

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