

Civil engineering: reflective journal



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Civil Engineering Technical: Learning Journal

Stage 1: Understanding Me

My first degree was in Civil Engineering. I choose the field of civil engineering because I wanted to explore and study the inner details of the structure, also my academic strengths was mathematics and I enjoyed doing civil engineering as the most of the subjects was dealt with calculation and structural concepts. I like studying at the university because of the professors were very cooperative. They give me understanding that how the difficult technical data can be easily understood which really helped me a lot when I start doing my job after the degree. I gain confidence in my university time as I always feel it difficult before my degree to be confident in myself. However, after building structural concepts in Civil engineering I wanted also to learn management skills in depth, as designing the building and running the project effectively at the site are two different fields so to cope with it I decided to take up an MSc. Construction course at Birmingham City University. While Civil Engineering has been very effective at equipping me with the technical skills of the trade, I find it both useful and practical to be able to acquire the soft skills of management to become a good manager. I feel that in taking up this course, my career horizon would be broadened since I will not be limited only to the Engineering profession. The management component of the course would help me apply it cross functionally. It shall then open new career avenues for me as a professional. Moreover, learning questionnaire results suggests that I am pragmatist type of person according to it I can solve problem in a realistic way which suits the present conditions rather than obeying fixed theories, ideas or rules. Also

my MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) results suggest that I am an INTJ (Introverted Intuition with Extraverted thinking).

Stage 2: Learning from Practice

- Technical Knowledge

The first situation which I want to share on the importance of technical knowledge was when I was assigned a new member of staff who was then tasked to handle a fairly important project even if he was new. The organisation I was working was one of the leading construction company of middle east and my role in the office was an assistant project manager. To train the new staff was quite difficult because I had to ensure that his learning curve was quite fast. If not, his project time line would be adversely affected. To be able to ably lead him, I realised that project management skills are a requisite. This necessarily meant being very familiar with the specifications of the project and be able to translate these requirements into a concrete work plan. Moreover, it is also important to be able to have the basic technical knowledge required with working within one's industry. When the leader does not have such requisite technical knowledge, it becomes a basis for a sense of inequity among those that he leads. For example, the staff say, ' How come he was designated to be leader of the group, when I feel that I am even better than him? In this particular case, I felt that I exercised good project management skills since we were able to accomplish what we had set out to reach during the beginning of my assignment as interim superior. However, I was of course limited by my experience. For instance, in this particular case the project that my member of staff has been assigned with was something I was already familiar with, and so I did not

have a hard time handling a similar project. In the highly technical aspects of a project, I am honest enough to approach someone who is knowledgeable in that aspect, and ask questions. I am most willing to enter into a buddy up or mentoring relationship with a senior or guru in technical areas, and for this particular situation I also seek help from one of my colleague who was working with me. I took advice from him on particular matters and issues where I felt that I cannot deal with it properly (Knowledge boundaries) and convey the information I gained from my colleague to the new staff who was under my supervision to enhance his skills.

- Organisational Knowledge

In the middle of last year, my superior had to take an emergency leave for a substantially long period of time. This necessitated someone taking on the role in the interim. As a direct consequence of this appointment, I had to manage 3 staff who were formerly my equals. This introduced complexity in the way my colleagues and I related to each other. One factor which aggravated the situation was the fact that my superior did not have the time to endorse the role properly because of the flurry with which he had to leave. Although according to company procedures and rules the person who is leaving his post has to give proper understanding about the procedures of the company and the responsibilities he was dealing with to the new coming employee. At first, I felt overwhelmed with my new role, because this meant more responsibility. Moreover, I was very conscious of how my colleagues would react to my appointment. Two of the three staff who then became my staff for two months were happy with the arrangement; however one member of staff had very serious motivational issues that were directly

brought about by my being appointed to the new post. This man had longer tenure and thus more experience in the company compared to me; a culture of entitlement which has pervaded in the company for a long time has created a strong expectation in him of being the next in line, in terms of leadership of the team. Quite obviously, I had a tough time influencing him to follow my lead to be able to accomplish the tasks in the workplan set for the month. The feelings of anxiety, ambiguity, and pressure all built up within the team. These were clearly attested to by the behaviour of the problematic staff. He had frequent absences, did not respond appropriately when called upon, and did not follow instructions as expected. It was a nightmare! What complicated the matter more was the fact that we belonged to different cultures. This colleague was from a collectivist culture (India), and this introduced peculiarities in the way he reacted to the whole situation. I had to be able comprehend why he reacted the way he did and be able to address issues from its roots.

I felt that there was shortcoming in terms of clarifying the organisation that my superior has envisioned while he was absent. Given the circumstances that we were in at that time, there was little time for him to endorse the role formally and to orient my staff about my new role and what the expectations were from their end. Role ambiguity then resulted from the newly established organisation, causing conflict between me as an informal superior and the problematic employee who had aspirations of being promoted. Much had to be done from my end to be able to establish a sense of equity among the members of the team mainly through a thorough discussion of roles, tasks and expectations. First, I had to orient them about

the situation, saying that this set-up was in fact only for the interim, until such time that my boss came back to lead our team again. Rapport building also had to be done so that even as the organisational structure was not formal in itself, I would have enough influence on them to enable me to deliver the set goals. Next, I had to call frequent meetings to be able to set clear goals. In carrying out the planning process, I ensured that each one's objectives were specific, measurable, attainable and realistic. I also took the chance to be able to clarify the processes and procedures that we ought to follow during the 3 months that we were tasked to work together. The conflicts that I have encountered are mainly caused by personality clashes – differences in opinions and ideas that have complicated the set-up at the outset.

- Relationships

The third situation which focuses on relationships is one in which I had to deal with the older staff who had aspirations of being promoted (same illustration as that of Organisational Knowledge). At that time, I was assigned as a team lead for 3 months, which caused conflict between the two of us. Apart from the fact that he was older in terms of both age and tenure, I have also noticed that we were very different in terms of personality and this all the more aggravated the way we dealt with each other.

The primary reasons for conflict were differences in the perceptions among the parties involved in the situation. For instance, I have an INTJ (Introverted Intuition with Extraverted thinking) profile, which precludes me from being expressive of my feelings and emotions. My staff turned out to be very vocal and confrontational about how they felt about the situation, and I felt it took

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a lot of effort on my end to be able to reach an equilibrium within the team. One of my weaknesses is not being too open to feedback and constructive criticism, which also did not help in establishing rapport with my staff. There was much that needed to be delivered during that period, by the team, and it did not help that my staff did not have the motivation to deliver these because of psychological and emotional hurdles. I tried my best to motivate them by matching tasks with people very prudently, considering both their strengths and weaknesses. I accorded them autonomy in doing things, and was only there on a consultative role, rather than dictating what they should do on a day-to-day basis.

When I was asked by my boss to act as a team lead for 3 months with this difficult staff in tow, I had to make sure that I gave him and the rest of my team members effective feedback without sounding too bossy or authoritative. This was important since improving work performance and providing feedback about it should be a routine part of the performance management process. Feedback should be based on observed and/or verifiable work-related behaviours, actions, statements, and results. This type of feedback is called behavioural feedback. Effective feedback helps the employee sustain good performance, to develop new skills and to improve performance when necessary.

I also ensured that each member of my team knew what I expected from him or her in terms of goals. Goals or objectives are statements of intent to achieve specific business results. I ensured that they were measurable, controllable and were directly related to such results. I realised that in setting goals or objectives, they should be specific and significant,

measurable, achievable, results-oriented, time-bound, engaging, and reviewed.

Apart from this, I ensured that my team should be given constant feedback to know how well they are doing their tasks. Feedback giving also increases the effectiveness of goal setting, feedback should be provided to the employee on his progress in reaching his goal. My feedback can include verbally telling my staff how he is doing, placing a chart on a wall, or displaying a certain color of light in work pace will result in goal attainment and a different color of light when the pace is too slow to reach the goal. I also learned that feedback increases performance best when it is positive and informational rather than negative and controlling.

- Situation outside of organizational perspective

In my role as a family member, there was a time when conflict arose because of lack of role clarification. In our households, we have various roles to play which may be equally important: parent, son, father, and so on. We also have tasks to deliver to be able to sufficiently perform these roles. In one instance, my sibling and I had conflict because it was not clear who would prepare a particular family activity. Both of us were busy with our respective professions/careers and nobody seemed to have the time to prepare this social activity. They expected that I will handle all the arrangements of the activity myself as I am elder in my brother and sisters. Although I was not good in arranging and managing the big party functions at home. The matter come to critical point when at the time of the party function no formal or informal arrangements have been made for the coming

guests and this create embarrassment in the family and i was made responsible for this situation. In the end, we were able to resolve the conflict by thoroughly communicating about the activity, specifying who would do what and by when. I realised through this experience the criticality of effective communication, not only within the sphere of the enterprise, but even within the realm of personal relationships. Assigning job responsibilities among participants before the time of any event is important and necessary.

- Wider learning and New Narrative

Technical development. I have realised that one source of power and authority is the level of technical knowledge that one has. To be able to develop a stronger business sense, achievement orientation, and technical competence as well, I would like to have a mentoring relationship with a guru, or at least someone who is more senior than me who works in a field I am interested in pursuing. I want to learn both technical and soft competencies through this mentoring relationship. It would also be useful to attend seminars or workshops that focus on business acumen and strategy since these are among my weaknesses. I am also interested in pursuing classes that may sharpen my interpersonal relationship skills so that I may leverage more on my social networks and see things from a long term view.

Areas which I need to develop. In the end, the situation which I have discussed above in technical, organizational knowledge and relationships has been very helpful in making me realise what I need to improve in myself. I realised that first and foremost, I must be able to understand myself to be able to better relate with others. In fact, because of the experience I got during my job, I have volunteered to take the MBTI just to provide better

insight on how my personality affects the way I relate to others. Based on my personal assessment and feedback from others, my strengths as a leader (at least during the time I took on the post of my boss) include leading by example and being a strategic thinker. However, I have several areas for improvement which I may further develop, including being more imaginative and creative; being mature and developing a clear and convincing vision for the future; creating a performing organisation and team and being a team player myself; extracting value from social networks; pursuing goals long term; positive framing of events and people; recognizing opportunities for absorbing uncertainty; learning from all over the world; and seeing and preserving the whole venture in a long-term prospective. I am also very good at probing attested to my high score in being an investigator. However, a weakness may be not being too open to feedback and constructive criticism. Moreover, my MBTI results suggest that I am an INTJ. This suggests that I am insightful, conceptual and creative; rational, detached and objectively critical; am likely to have a clear vision of future possibilities; apt to enjoy complex challenges; am likely to value knowledge and competence; apply high standards to themselves and others; independent; trust their own judgments and perceptions more than those of others; and usually seen by others as private, reserved and hard to know. While I may be able to work more effectively with those who have the same profile, I must be able to adapt to those who have a different preference. To make this possible, I should be able to exercise situational leadership – that is, being able to assess both the needs of my staff and the circumstances to be able to manage or lead him more effectively. Many of the areas that I need to develop are not necessarily technical but have much to do with people

Finally, after experiencing this situation, I have a more staunch desire to develop my leadership potential in the upcoming years.

Everything that I will do or say as a leader will be greater than before in importance beyond all reason. Having the aim to develop and achieve objectives has geared me for success. I have enough motivation to exert all my best efforts to realise my capabilities and be able to use them in harnessing my skills. Aiming to be a leader entails a lot of effort; I should be responsible with my actions and be sympathetic with others. I should be prepared with radical changes in behaviours and become a critical thinker towards management affairs and issues. All people have their own abilities to lead, but not all are given the opportunity to lead, so, given the chance to lead I will definitely grab the chance of proving my capabilities in leading people and making a difference in future. After this experience, my belief that effective leaders are not born with the talent of knowing how to lead has been reinforced. To a certain extent, they absorb knowledge, they gain experience, they listen to and see the world around and beyond their organisation. They are also competent of providing the qualities of leadership required for particular conditions. There are various types of effective leaders and they are the transformational leader, the pragmatic leader and the charismatic leader; however these unique qualities can be mixed altogether in one person in different times and ways . I have learned that leaders can truly become transformational when they boost awareness of what is good, right, beautiful and important; when they facilitate to raise the needs of the followers in terms of self-actualisation and achievement; when they cultivate high moral maturity in followers; and when they push

followers to go further than their self-interests for the benefit of their organisation, society or group. Embracing the theory of transformational leadership and having the objective of developing my leadership skills, I would like to see myself as a transformational leader, who can someday rebuild and organisation without having to enforce personality but instead appeal to people, influence them and be able to gain their respect and trust , As a leader, I would like to develop my ability to portray a clear vision, to see a realisable goal for the team’s action and efforts of accomplishing unified goals. I would like to be someone who will trust people, who will provide their needed resources and someone who will encourage them to go forward. I know I can lead, since everyone can learn how to lead by realizing the capability of each person to respond to the call of leadership and be able to make a difference. Having the will to learn, anyone can take the challenge of leadership to another level, because leadership can be practised in all aspects of life; it is a an aptitude that I can learn to broaden my perception, set goals and have a holistic understanding of human behaviour and act in full force to be able to get to where I want to be.

Because of the serious time constraints which I have experienced, I realised that I should strive to live the time management principles that are taught by Stephen Covey to seriously develop my leadership potential. According to the third habit, a manager must be able to “ put first things first” . In my line of work, I have to learn how to prioritize tasks based on sense of urgency and importance. Many times during that period, there were so many things, people and situations that easily distracted me from the task that I have at hand. I have observed this among the staff that I supervised. The phone

ringing, emails, unnecessary breaks, among others. I am striving to make efficient use of my time by reducing if not totally avoiding activities that do are both not urgent and not important. These are activities that fall under Stephen Covey's 4th quadrant. I also wish to emphasise those tasks which are important and yet are not urgent. In being able to constantly prioritise these tasks, I will not have to cram or be up in a flurry all the time.

Sometimes, these activities start out as not urgent, and yet because of procrastination, they eventually turn out to be urgent. This discipline of constant work (and not cramming) is important in effective time management. I should also be able to allot sufficient time for other facets of my life, including social, spiritual, and emotional facets, which are as equally important as my work or professional life

Organizational structural development

I have realized that organizational structure change and development needs to be effectively and constantly managed to ensure the team shall be able to deliver the results expected. I feel that it is very important for a successful leader to know how to motivate his employees. Why was the transition to my leadership difficult? The difficulty actually lies in intangible factors, particularly spelling out our team's culture. I now learn that there is both a visible and an invisible organisation. The former focuses on the easily observable components of the organisation, including its tools, processes, roles, and other components within the formal parameters of the group. Underneath these tangibles are the more influential facets which make up our culture, namely, our customers, values, beliefs, taboos, stereotypes, traditions, language, and behaviours. In effect, when transitioning into this

new set-up of leadership, I had to understand all these intangibles. If this is not done, then the leadership change would have ostensibly failed because only the formal structures have been moved for the change, but not those which are practically more important.

I have seen how my staff have set goals and teams can influence work behaviour by influencing these goals. I encouraged participation in goal setting among my staff to increase commitment and acceptance of the new set-up. I also realised that individual goal setting was more effective than group goals because it is the impact of goals on intentions that is important. However, I also do realise that although participation in goal setting may increase satisfaction, it does not always lead to higher performance. As much as possible, I would strive to involve my staff in decisions that affect them and ensure that their targets are challenging enough to keep them motivated.

Due to fact that the problematic employee had a different culture, I also learned that the way in which the social environment is interpreted is strongly influenced by the cultural background of the perceiver. This implies that the attributes that are seen as characteristic or prototypical for leaders may also strongly vary in different cultures. I had to exert influence and exercise leadership with prudent consideration of the culture of the staff. Finally, knowledge on the peculiarities of motivating employees from across cultures is critical if I am to espouse a multi-cultural work setting, And I will motivate people in future by keeping a deep look at their needs, for example some people get motivated if their salary is increased and some people like

that their job responsibilities increase. I want to develop further my ability to create a strong sense of equity among my employees or staff in future.

Through this experience, I realised that people choose the behaviour they believe will maximize their payoff. It states that people look at various actions and choose the one they believe is most likely to lead to the rewards they want the most. I learned that anticipation of rewards is important as well as the perceived contingency between the behaviours desired by the organisation and the desired rewards I also learned that since different people desire different rewards, I must, as superior, try to match rewards with what my staff want. On my end as an interim superior, it is important that I have a knowledge of the rewards that appeal to them so that I may match these with their attainment of objectives, and in future I will try to be more socialise among my employees so that I better know about their need and demands.

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