Coaching for Change Management and Institutional Development: The Case of the Programme Delivery Department in The University of the West Indies, Open Campus

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Research in change management and institutional development, typically, examines situations where both staff and a defined work culture are present. Much less has been written about these issues in the context where the majority of staff is new, many job positions are also new and no training manuals are available to guide leader and staff. This paper reports a case study on how the author/head of an ODL department provided leadership and management in the latter context. It explores the use of informal coaching techniques to drive change and institutionalise an ODL departmental culture of excellence.

The Institutional Context:

The Academic Programming and Delivery (APAD) Division, of The University of the West Indies Open Campus, in July 2012, embarked on a restructuring exercise that resulted in a change from an academic to a functional structure. The head of a defunct academic department was asked to head the new Programme Delivery Department (PDD). Recruitment of staff was mainly internal to the institution but external to APAD. The UWI mandated APAD to develop and deliver undergraduate, graduate, and continuing and professional education online programmes in sixteen English speaking Caribbean countries. This was the context within which the new head of department started PDD.

Research Advising Change Management

Literature on best practices in leadership and change management has produced numerous researches over the years reflecting shifts in the ways in which practices by great managers contribute to company success. Current research on best practices in leadership and change management indicates that "employee engagement" is an essential criterion (The 25-Year Gallup Survey on Employees and Managers). Additionally, studies show a positive relationship between employee satisfaction, staff retention and overall company success in organizations that have moved away from the command-and-control management approach and reliance on corporate communication, to one that is more inclusive of all levels of staff. Groyberg and Slind (2012) support the latter "organizational conversations" in which leaders promote operational flexibility, employee engagement, and strategic alignment. In this work environment, four elements of "organizational conversations" are applied to reflect the essential attributes of interpersonal conversation - intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. In support of managing communication through employee engagement, the literature strongly supports coaching as a valuable method.

Flaherty (2005, p.15) describes coaching as a way to work with others "that leave[s] them more competent and more fulfilled so they are more able to contribute to their organizations and find meaning in what they are doing". Placed in its broader framework coaching requires building a relationship that is mutually satisfying, based on mutual respect and trust, *inter alia*, resulting in improved long-term excellent performance that is self-correcting and self-generating (Flaherty, 2005). In this context, studies recommend coaching by a head of a department and other line staff, as a supportive method for a working environment that requires management of communication through organizational conversation and employee engagement.

Given the institutional context in this case study and research on change management and institutional development, as head of PDD, I selected an alternative to the command-and-control management and corporate communication approach. I chose to use coaching as a technique to create a climate of "organizational conversations" (Groyberg and Slind, 2012) that would, through employee engagement, promote training of staff and their understanding of job knowledge and development of functional skills and team building, operational flexibility, and strategic alignment. The objective was to inspire excellence in staff, resulting in improved, long-term, excellent performance that is self-correcting and self-generating and would, ultimately, promote ODL institutional development.

However, I had no formal training as a coach; research studies in the use of coaching in the workplace mainly indicated that institutions usually employed professional coaches. With an obvious research gap on the practical application of informal coaching and, initially, I had no clear guidance and support in applying informal coaching. However, I proceeded to seek answers that would facilitate informal coaching techniques in PDD. As additional tools to assist me as a novice coach I later selected, on the advice of a professional coach, Bruce Tuckman's Model, Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing stages of coaching to promote development of teamwork skills (Smith, 2005), and the RASCI model for training staff in clarifying their roles and responsibilities.

ODL CASE: THE PROGRAMME DELIVERY DEPARTMENT

Method

This study explores the use of informal coaching techniques to inspire and drive change to institutionalise an ODL departmental culture of excellence aimed at long-term organizational benefits. Qualitative methods were used in data gathering and analysis (inclusive of critical reflexivity), which allowed further opportunities to reflect on practice and discern meaning and clarity.

Four months after my assuming the position of head of department, UWI acquired the services of a professional coach who successfully coached and engaged with me to achieve breakthrough results in three major areas of needs analysis on my personal style of development as manager. During the initial phase of this study I worked independently as an informal coach using the skills I was developing with my personal coach. During the phase of planning training exercises for staff, I was able to consult with my coach for three months, which gave me confidence in coaching. During the final phase of the study I worked independently.

Participants

The participants in this case study included twenty-three full time staff, distributed across three geographical locations and time zones in the Caribbean. The department had six full time staff positions, requiring a carefully coordinated 'Team' approach to achieve efficient and effective delivery of programmes and customer service to stakeholders. Staff positions included: Programme Manager (n=7PM), Clerical Assistant (n=4CA), Instructional Development Coordinator (n=1IDC), Learning Support Specialist (n=5LSS), Course Delivery Assistant (n=5CDA), and Administrative Assistant (n=1AA).

The Setting and Scenario

Challenges were anticipated, due, in part, to the following five factors:

1. This new functional structure required leadership and management in the delivery of all programme categories, requiring staff to have a wider scope of institutional knowledge (policy and procedures).

2. Sixty-five percent (15 of 23) of staff were new to the department with no prior working experience in their new job positions. Staff was also distributed across three geographical locations and time zones and exhibited different work cultures and varying degrees of competence working in a virtual environment and programme delivery function.
3. The remaining thirty-five percent (n=8) who had worked in the previous APAD structure now had their job positions/responsibilities modified in this new structure, hence, the need to make necessary adjustments to their job function.
4. Some job positions were newly created and others had to be modified, which, to varying degrees, required new knowledge and development of new skills for all members of staff.
5. I was inexperienced in managing a department of this size at the tertiary institution level.

Coaching Techniques

Informal coaching was used as daily conversations between the head and the team. The term 'coaching" was rarely used but, given the departmental context and composition of the team with 65% of staff unfamiliar with their job functions the approach taken accommodated formal knowledge building sessions and practical learning exercises to provide 'job knowledge' and development of teamwork skills through the following strategies:

- Coaching sub-groups in identifying: their needs, support options for learning, and performance standard
- Coaching individuals who served as line managers and who, in turn, returned to lead their group on work related learning tasks (e.g. RASCI of job tasks)
- Employing "organizational conversations" with individuals to identify their personal values and those of the institution, as well as, to articulate their interpretation of the job
- Using 'active listening' and questioning strategy to guide reflection "for action", "in action" and "on action" for staff to apply job knowledge and develop requisite skills for their job functions as a team
- Modeling the behaviour of a PM as lead coach and team leader for the Associate Degree project with the work group - CA, CDA, LSS and IDC staff - and conducting individual coaching with the PM to develop teamwork skills
- Presenting feedback on progress and providing encouragement /motivation
- Holding ongoing employee engagement sessions through a series of virtual workshops with all categories of staff in the department
- Holding face-to-face workshops and conducting a final virtual session to bring closure to the workshop sessions.

Success Indicators:

The following are indicators of the outcomes of informal coaching after one year.

1. All staff will demonstrate in practice, at least 90% of the time, an understanding of their roles and responsibilities
2. At least 50% of staff should apply teamwork skills at the "norming" stage of Tuckman's Model
3. At least 75% of staff will demonstrate commitment to the job and the department's mission and vision.

Collection and Analysis of the Data

During the implementation of the study, data collection included multiple strategies, inclusive of: (1) observation; (2) informal interviews; (3) focus group meetings; and (4) secondary data for evaluation purposes by the head/researcher. These strategies served as reflective-reflexive tools to guide informal coaching practice. Data used for presenting the findings was conducted in two phases: during the face-to-face workshop sessions, and one month later after the 'closure' of the study. Both phases allowed for measurement of emotional and rational engagement drivers. The first phase required participants to reflect on relevant areas of focus and to respond through graphic/drawings, writing and dialogue. The second used an open-ended questionnaire, anonymously delivered to all members of staff to measure specific engagement drivers.

Engagement Drivers (Measured)	
Emotional Drivers	
Co Workers	Pride in Department
Rational Drivers	
Development	Line of Sight

The data analysis used participants' narrative responses organized under themes. In addition to qualitative responses, observational notes and reflections by the researcher as active participant is provided.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study focused on using informal coaching with a specific target group in an ODL department, aiming, after one year, to engender a committed staff, competent in working as a "team" in a virtual environment, and knowledgeable in their job functions. The findings have been organized to reflect on the achievement of these. Qualitative reflections are presented through my observations and reflections as coach, as well as, the participants' lens.

Lead Coach: Coaching strategies used

Initially, I prepared the APAD staff for the incoming new staff and the anticipated changes in roles and functions of PDD staff. As head I travelled to Trinidad to meet with and provide orientation for six newly recruited Programme Managers. Additional staff joined PDD two months later. I had preferred, then, to have all PDD members meet in a physical space and get to know each other. However, this was not approved. My later observations and findings suggest that had the opportunity been provided for staff to meet in the start-up exercises of establishing PDD, our group development could have progressed faster through the "forming to the storming" stages. These stages proved essential to group development; not meeting face-to-face significantly delayed the "norming" stage and explained non-accomplishment in the "performing" stage.

Given the overwhelming number of inexperienced new staff (65%) needing to learn their roles and responsibilities, coaching was first attempted with large groups. However, individual staff were reluctant to dialogue in this large department setting, although each spoke readily with me, one-on-one, after we successfully passed the "forming" stage. Getting persons to engage in conversation as a virtual group was challenging. Observations and conversations with individuals indicated that most persons were learning their individual roles but were not functioning through

teamwork. Teamwork coordination across the six roles was essential to meet performance standards. Indications were that, overall, staff was unwilling to put themselves out there in fear of being seen as incapable of doing the job and losing face.

As coach, I, therefore, reduced large group development sessions and increased individual coaching sessions to provide feedback, build confidence and encourage interaction with colleagues in an open forum to promote dialogue and collaboration in work groups. In so doing, I learnt more about individuals. But these sessions were not sustainable as the overwhelming volume of feedback needed from individuals on stakeholder cases staff was unsure of handling, was too high for me to manage effectively. I therefore transitioned to sub-group coaching and collaborative strategy. Always, the priority was 'team work'. Using sub-group coaching sessions was explored, with the CDA and LSS Supervisors and one PM, participating as co-coaches for their groups. As line managers, their role as co-coach was important in guiding their group, thereby allowing me to work more closely with others. Later developments saw individual PMs taking on leadership responsibilities and reporting on group decisions, indicating transition to the "norming" stage, taking responsibility for achieving programme delivery goals.

Evolving as a coach

The participants' performance evolved as I evolved as a coach. Two notable experiences for me that served as breakthrough in coaching, moving the department closer to its objectives were (i) returning to Trinidad three months into the study to meet with the PMs and Clerical Assistants; and (ii) holding face-to-face workshops in three locations. The first allowed for dialogue, feedback, and a sense of inclusion between head and staff, which created a climate that facilitated an engaging environment for easier 'conversation' that helped to move group development from "forming" to "storming". This improvement did not immediately translate into teamwork but it created the climate for me, as lead coach, to work with sub-groups and model what "team work" should look like when the PM, as lead, works with other roles – the CA,CDA, LSS, IDC, AA – and how to RASCI shared responsibilities.

The second was the face-to-face workshop exercise that interfaced knowledge and skills in a very positive way to "bond" the department. Importantly, this face-to-face workshop allowed persons from different roles to interact for the first time in this type of conversational forum and rebrand the department. During the rebranding workshop, participants discussed personal and core department values, and created vision and mission statements, which were later, shared with colleagues in the other locations and during decision-making taken in the virtual workshop with all members of staff. Reflective data gave an insight into aspects of the process that resonated with individuals:

P1: What resonated with me from the workshop were the benefit of information sharing, the opportunity to communicate on matters that have been issues for me as a Programme Manager for some time.

P2: … the different perspectives … on how [staff] viewed where we are now in relationship to where we need to be as a department

P3: I was able to identify and better understand the department's product, services, functions, stakeholders and each of my teammate's role and responsibilities …

However, in one setting not all persons were completely comfortable. One CA reflected:

P4: Though it was a great day, I felt a little left out in discussions, as I am a CA, not at the level of others. I had points and could not bring it up because of how (maybe) I think it might be received…

The reflection above allowed me to guide the following day's session by paying attention to perceived levels of status in the department and its potential to negatively impact engagement.

The final wrap-up workshop session, held by videoconference clearly demonstrated changed staff behaviour. Staff members were more open to expressing their feelings, energized and committed as a team behind PDD's vision and mission.

Vision	Professional dependable delivery-Reflecting a culture of service
Mission	To inspire, train and empower stakeholders by providing exceptional distance educational services

On reflection, I would not ascribe this change solely to the influence of the face-to-face workshop but, clearly, it did make a difference in creating a climate of intimacy and making persons feel included and more willing to now speak openly. The rebranding exercise was also clearly a contributing factor. In hindsight, the videoconference would have been an excellent tool for virtual conversations, especially at the "forming" stage.

Final Reflections From Staff

Findings from a questionnaire administered a month after the virtual workshop provide data on two engagement drivers – emotional and rational - that answer the objectives of this study: understanding roles and shared job tasks, use of team approach and commitment to the department. Findings from observation of functional practice and participants' data overall indicate that all success indicators were met.

Understanding roles and shared job tasks

Staff in all job positions expressed understanding of their roles/responsibilities as a team. However, reflections from participants overall suggest that the PM was the less confident /secure group, although observations do confirm that some PMs, in practice, exhibit clear-to-very clear understanding of their responsibilities. On analysis, the PM group showed mixed reactions. Some had clearly progressed while others remained unsure:

PM1: My understanding at the initial stage of employment was that I would be responsible for mainly the planning and coordination … As I continue working, my understanding is somewhat muddy, as different items, work tasks, expectations seemed to be added frequently…

Other roles, particularly the AA, CDA and LSS staff who had worked previously in APAD, showed advanced understanding and skills working in teams.

P5: I would describe my overall understanding of roles and responsibilities as "very clear" …and although there has been much expansion with regards to scope … I feel that excellent communication has allowed me to grasp and perform required duties…

Line of Sight

In measuring 'line of sight' to determine staff understanding of expectations and how their contributions impact the organization individuals were asked to respond to their understanding of the vision and mission and whether these helped to define their role in giving a better understanding of expectations of them. Ninety-one percent of staff indicated clarity and understanding of the vision and mission and their value in providing guidance. Two persons (9%) were less sure.

Level of Commitment

All staff members felt a fairly strong to very strong commitment to PDD. Observation and secondary data also triangulated this finding, showing persons working extended hours and responding to stakeholders even on public holidays; their collaborative engagement and growing pride as a member of PDD. Commitment was evident even in instances of uncertainty where the staff member's role was not fully interpreted or the individual was overwhelmed by the level of responsibility of the position.

PM2 states:

On a scale of 1 - 10 my level of commitment to PDD is about a 7. Personally I would like it to be higher … I am now a little more comfortable in my role. I believe that my level of commitment would increase with time.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that informal coaching techniques by a head of department in an ODL environment, can, through engagement, help contribute to employees' development of job knowledge, development of teamwork skills, and lead to staff commitment to the department and the organisational goals. Additionally, it has verified that staff has begun to develop a work culture that values organisational conversation, reflective practice, collaboration and a commitment to promoting excellence in performance. This has yielded important benefits for the Programme Delivery Department that can, ultimately, engender institutional development.

However, staff engagement is not a short-term initiative: continued coaching would be valuable to build steady progress and continued committed staff. In the context of this study the following could, therefore, increase the usefulness of informal coaching:

- Improve the head's coaching abilities through formal training in coaching
- Increase the confidence of line managers as co-coaches (supervisors) in their coaching skills
- Reinforce alignment of personal and organizational values and connect practice to the department's vision
- Assess and apply strategies of role modeling and "holding back answers" to improve performance
- Promote continued use of "organizational conversation" to develop group skills to the "performing" stage.

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