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ABSTRACT: It has become evident that higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman are currently experiencing change, in particular when it involves implementing quality management systems. The underlying principles of quality management are participatory decision making. Our methods for conducting improvements in quality management, strategic planning and other topics model this principle. Large group methods or interventions involve gathering an entire organization to talk about, influence or invent needed changes (Bunker & Alban, 2002). Change is a result of purposeful social construction by organizational members. It involves a goal (approach/plan), implementation (deployment/act/so), evaluation (results/check) and modification (improvement). This paper explores the different large group methods being used in the field today and it proposes that large group methods allow a forum to overcome some of the hurdles and challenges that are being faced in Oman such as; How do you encourage sharing information in a fiercely competitive environment? And how do you establish an informal network of peers? We were witness to some of these challenges being over come when we used large group methods during various strategic planning workshops with members of staff from the different colleges in Oman. Results from the evaluations of the workshops highlighted that participants enjoyed the opportunity to network and share ideas with their peers as well as being involved in group discussions and brainstorming ideas. The paper will also propose that large group methods can be used effectively in Omani culture strengthening goals towards Omanisation.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations constantly encounter forces driving them to change (Manning & Binzagr, 1996). Change does not always necessarily involve negative outcomes. However, because change means doing something new and unknown a natural reaction from staff in organizations can be to resist it. Therefore it is important for organizations, such as those involved in quality management in higher education in Oman, to recognise this and manage change in an effective manner. Researchers and consultants in the field of organizational change and development continually face the challenges of implementing and developing interventions that manage change effectively. Traditional interventions like team building and survey feedback have generally relied on working with small groups one at a time (Manning & Binzagr, 1996) and these groups generally consist of members representing a single tier in the organizational structure. When it comes to developing strategies and making decisions to assist organizations through change, the traditional approach has been to only involve stakeholder groups that consist of key members (White, 2002). However, research suggests that this may not be the most effective way to implement and drive change. Researchers have recognised the need to include more voices to participate in the design and implementation of organizational processes. Interventions must be developed to change whole systems in record-breaking time (Manning & Binzagr, 1996). It is becoming quite clear that there is an increased interest in working with larger groups that represent the widest possible range of individuals in an organization or organizations (White, 2002). This is the case for institutions implementing the changes required to develop and maintain robust quality management systems. This paper will review large group methods that institutions might find useful in their change efforts. It will also explore outcomes from a number of large group methods that have been implemented recently across different institutions in Oman. These cases exemplify the effective use of large group methods to involve a wide range of stakeholders in the change initiative and developing capacity of staff themselves to replicate these methods within their own institutions.

WHAT ARE LARGE GROUP METHODS?

Large group methods are interventions that involve a participative meeting, conference or event with a large number of participants (10 to 2000) comprising a diverse cross-section of an organization’s stakeholders. It is premised on the idea that participants gather together in the same space and work on real organizational issues of strategic importance to help bring about fast change (Leith, 2004). There is a greater understanding amongst practitioners that to be consistent with whole system thinking, interventions should occur accordingly at the whole system level (Manning & Binzagr, 1996). These approaches assume that everybody, not just experts or management, is required to improve the whole system.
By enabling hundreds, even thousands, of people to gather together for the purpose of planning strategic change and exploring its implications, change happened quickly and was implemented quickly. Having all stakeholders together in the same room creates a broader information base, improves cross-functional working, facilitates simultaneous planning and implementation, and maximizes “whole system” (or organizational) learning (Leith, 2006; Bunker & Alban 2002). It also encourages open communication and collaboration resulting in people being more willing to implement the changes because they were involved in the development of them and subsequent decisions made as a consequence.

There are many large group interventions that have emerged. Below are popular methods currently being utilized in organizational development and change practice:

- Future Search
- Search conference
- Open space
- The conference model

They will be discussed in some detail with relevant implications to Omani institutions noted.

FUTURE SEARCH

Founders of the future search intervention, Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, describe it as “a large group planning meeting that brings a ‘whole system’ into the room to work on a task-focused agenda. In a Future Search, people have a chance to take ownership of their past, present, and futures, confirm their mutual values, and commit to action plans grounded in reality.” Future Search generally involves 60 to 80 people, incorporating members from all significant stakeholder groups and runs for 2-3 days. It allows people to come together and discuss their past, present and desired future, allowing them to discover common ground and develop concrete action plans. Participants in a Future Search will work through five stages:

1. Review the past from perspectives of self, organization/community and society; identify the events, trends and developments shaping the future.
2. Map the present in all its complexity; identify the positives and negatives resulting from relations with the institution or issue at hand.
3. Create ideal future scenarios of the most desirable and attainable futures, 5 to 20 years ahead.
4. Find common ground and develop a shared vision.
5. Develop action plans (Leith, 2006).

Future Search could be utilised within Omani higher education institutions which are developing or reviewing their strategic plans. Aspects of Future Search have been implemented with success in strategic planning forums in Omani higher education conducted by the authors in various institutions.

SEARCH CONFERENCE

Developed by Fred and Merrelyn Emery, Search Conference is a way to gather diverse groups together in order to scan the current environment and understand it. It also helps the group to examine their history as a system, assessing the present situation and agree on a future (Bunker & Alban, 2006). This is generally done over a 2.5 day (minimum) period and involves around 35 to 40+ participants. Participants are selected due to their knowledge of parts of the system. In Omani higher education, this would comprise, for example, participants who understand the student administration system of the college as well as those who understand how teaching occurs within the Institution. Together these participants bring comprehensive knowledge of the system as a whole. Participants learn to piece the puzzle together by using their knowledge, which has been gained through their experience and the environment. As they conduct their large group conversation they become a creative learning community, accepting responsibility for their content and any outcomes (Emery, 1997).

The Search Conference has been used across participative strategic planning at a variety of levels within the organization, such as: entire industries; a whole corporation; a division or function. One of the most powerful applications of the Search Conference is that it can enable organizations seeking to create partnership or alliances to discover areas of agreement/disagreement and to rationalize the areas of disagreements, thus making their relationship sustainable. (Cobana).
Search Conference involves three main parts:

1. Learning about the environment.
At this stage the social changes that may affect the (higher education) system in the future are identified and a probable future is predicted as well as a desirable/preferable one. For example, a probable future for the higher education system in Oman could be proliferation of private offshore providers taking the majority of market share in higher education due to increased competition from external providers and increased demand from Omani students searching for high standards in their educational outcomes. A preferable future would be that Omani degrees achieve a majority market share due to successful outcomes of implementing robust quality management systems and their competitive advantage in providing more culturally relevant external programs.

2. Learning about the system.
The systems history is tracked at this stage as well as its current functioning. For example, the developments in the implementation of the quality management system both at the institutional and national level would be tracked. Decisions are made about what elements to keep, remove and which ones to create. This would be in response to questioning whether the current system fits the needs of a changing and expanding higher education system. This stage also involves the prioritizing a list of key strategic objectives that will be achieved in a given timeframe.

3. Action planning.
At this final stage of the Search Conference constraints are identified and ways to eliminate them. Also implementation plans are developed and next steps are agreed upon (Leith, 2006). Action planning here focuses on achieving the preferable future, while managing risks associated with the probable future.

A major goal of Search Conference is to assist the organization in creating strategies and action plans, which will enable it to attain and maintain a flexible and proactively adaptive relationship between itself and its environment.

OPEN SPACE

Harrison Owen founded open space technology in 1984. It is the least structured of all the large group interventions and is run over 1, 2 or 3 days and participation is voluntary. It allows participants to discuss a question or theme, which does not have a pre-determined solution or outcome. Participants create the agenda by choosing topics, related to the main topic or question and to which they may feel some passion or responsibility. Passion and responsibility are key fundamentals of Open Space. (Vaughanconsulting, 2008). An example of a theme that could be explored by using Open Space might be “how do you motivate staff and improve morale in our higher education institution?”. Participants could select topics that include leadership / management, workplace environment, conditions and pay, just to name a few. These topics would then form the basis of discussion groups where participants share their experiences and expertise in relation to finding plausible solutions to address each issue.

Open space places the responsibility of learning on the participant. If a participant is in a discussion group in which they feel they are not learning or contributing anything, than it is up to them to move to a different discussion group, rather than wasting their time.

Open space involves four main principles.

1. Whoever comes is the right people: Open space is not focused on group size but rather on having people participate who are passionate and involved with the main topic. Thus, participation is voluntary reducing the chances of having people attend that are negative or disengaged.

2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened: Open space technology assumes that real learning happens when we suspend judgment and open ourselves to new ideas thus encouraging participants to let go of their expectations.

3. Whenever it starts is the right time: There is a need to be relaxed about time because you cannot pressure someone or a group to be creative. Thus group schedules are relaxed and there is no pressure on people to “get to work”.

4. When it’s over its over: If everything has been said and done before the intended conclusion time than the discussion/meeting should be wrapped up. Alternatively if a group is being really productive and will run over the scheduled end time than it should be allowed to (Leith, 2006) Open space technology is an effective approach to use when a diverse group of people need to overcome a complex or conflict ridden issue in a short period of time. It is a powerful process to use when no one person knows the answer, but
rather the ongoing participation of the participants is required (Vaughanconsulting, 2008).

THE CONFERENCE MODEL

Dick and Emily Axelrod developed the Conference Model in 1992. It was the first large system change strategy to engage a critical mass of people in system wide change through a series of integrated conferences and walkthrus (Axelrod & Axelrod, 1998). Walkthrus are sessions run by 4-6 members who have been collecting data from the conferences. They synchronize information that has been collated in order to present it to participants who weren’t at the respective conference through an action replay or walkthrough session. In this way participants can keep track of issues and outcomes that were developed and discussed at each conference regardless of whether they attended. This cumulative knowledge is important for achieving agreement and understanding as each issue is discussed. Search Conference consists of four conferences that take about 2 days each and can accommodate around 60 participants. The first three conferences are about gaining understanding of important features of the organization. The last is about re-designing the organization based on this understanding.

These are:
1. Visioning Conference: This conference is similar to Future Search in that participants gain an understanding of the organization’s history and current situation. Based on this they develop a vision of where they would like to see achieved by the institution in the future.

2. Customer/Supplier Conference: Participants develop and understanding of the external world and how internal customer/supplier relationships work and what is required for the future. For higher education institutions this conference would involve students, staff, management, Ministry officials, employers, and other stakeholders in the community.

3. Technical Conference: Participants develop an understanding of the process of doing business, any discrepancies that are a caused and how these are handled. For higher education intuitions this would involve understanding core functions related to teaching and learning and how procedures and processes either hinder or enable the achievement of outcomes that are aligned with the institution’s mission.

4. Organizational design conference: Based on what has been learnt from the other conferences, and the Walkthrus, participants design an institution that will realize its vision, meet the demands of customers/suppliers and do this with the least issues and discrepancies possible (Leith, 2006). The issues that may be covered here should this be applied to higher education institutions might include redesign of approaches to: teaching and learning; student administrative systems; human resource systems including the development of work environments; governance and leadership; budget and resource allocation; and so on.

The conference model is a way to involve the whole organization to create system wide change. It involves the organization’s stakeholders, employees at all levels including important others from outside the organization such as customers, suppliers, officials from other ministries that impact on institutions, and community members (Axelrod & Axelrod, 1998), to gather and discuss the issue(s) at hand. It also enables participants to give their perspectives and gain others perspectives on the issue(s) being faced.

IMPLEMENTING LARGE GROUP METHODS IN OMAN: A HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

Whilst large group methods are deployed effectively in western countries such as the US and Australia, there is a dearth of research that demonstrates their effectiveness in middle eastern or gulf countries such as the Sultanate of Oman. In fact the values that underpin large group methods, such as participative decision making, empowerment and consideration of individual voice may not be appropriate values for organizations in differing cultures. Whilst it could be argued that mores and workplace norms in the Sultanate of Oman may not be underpinned by such values, it can be said that the new national system of quality management and accreditation in the Sultanate of Oman (see Carroll & Palermo, 2006), does share this value base in its adherence to collective processes that comprise any quality management system. The fundamental premise of a robust quality management system is its ability to involve all relevant stakeholders in reviewing and improving the Omani system. This is evidenced in the Oman Accreditation Council’s description of self study principles: “the Self Study, as with quality assurance and quality enhancement generally, should involve many people. A team approach is recommended” (Carroll, Razvi & Goodliffe, 2008, p.35). Therefore, given this mandate for value change, the author proceeded to conduct large group events at various institutions in the Sultanate of Oman for the purposes of: strategic planning; conducting self assessment; and conducting training and development on issues related to the establishment of a quality management system. The following section outlines details of these events.
METHOD

WORKSHOP FORMAT

The authors conducted three workshops in higher education and technical institutions across various Ministries. They varied in duration, from two days to five days, and comprised about 80-100 delegates in each instance. These workshops were conducted in conjunction with a local organizing committee and often involved committee members as facilitators, after receiving some training in facilitation skills. The methods employed during workshops were designed to maximize open communication in groups with the opportunities for developing ideas from differing perspectives, not just from those perspectives in use in the current organizational culture. Breaking down the hierarchical nature of communications that currently existed between staff at various levels of the institution was particularly important in the Omani society which inherently values respect for the absolute authority of persons in senior social and political positions (Carroll & Palermo, 2006). It was therefore critical to create a space that was more conducive to enabling people to voice their opinions in a large group. With this as a consideration, the method adopted in group activities in workshops was a modified version of the World Café approach.

The World Café approach is a large group method that encourages genuine conversations and can take about 2-3 hours. It involves breaking the large group into smaller groups which sit around a table, creating a café type feel. Each table contains paper and pens so the participants can write their ideas and the group is given approximately 20-30 minutes to brainstorm ideas on the topic and write them down. After the time is finished, the facilitator asks one person to remain at the table and the other members to move on to the next table. It is the duty of the remaining member to communicate the substance of the conversation that has just occurred to the new members of the group (Bunker & Alban, 2006), before they begin to build on the ideas and thus a new 'round' begins. The World Café approach is effective as there is minimal preparation time, it is quite a flexible program and it generates stimulating conversation, actions and reflections. World Cafe also serves to disrupt traditional hierarchies in groups as the group leader is rotated each time new members join a new discussion table. The discussion is also refined as new members offer suggestions for improvements before moving on to a new point in the conversation.

THE EVALUATION

In order to gain a sense of whether workshops were effective or not participants were asked to complete a participant Evaluation Survey which comprised of both quantitative and qualitative questions. The first 9 questions on the evaluation were quantitative and used a 1-5 Likert scale measuring agree-disagree responses; where 1 was strongly disagree to strongly agree. These questions measured responses to for example; “The topic and content was intellectually stimulating”; “The overall standard of presentation was high”; and “I would recommend this workshop to others”.

Participants were asked to give the workshop an overall rating from 1-5, where 1 represents poor and 5 represents excellent. In addition two questions asked participants about their understanding of the subject matter (for example, strategic planning) before and after the workshop. The scale used for responses to these questions represented the following: -4 denoting diminished understanding; 0 indicating no change; and +4 denoting maximum improvement.

RESULTS

The overall mean scores to the responses (N = 102) to questions that asked about the effectiveness of the workshop was high with response to the question “I would recommend this workshop to others” having the highest mean score of 4.18 (+1- 0.99).

The overall mean score for participants’ overall rating of effectiveness was 3.74 (+1-0.94) indicating that participants viewed the workshops favourably.

In relation to perceptions of learning by participants, responses tended to be on the positive side of the scale with mean responses indicating an increase in understanding post the workshop (M= 1.02 (+1- 0.92)). Further evaluations in the course of future workshops will track this indicator to monitor changes in understanding over time.

The evaluation also included qualitative questions related to: the degree to which the workshop met participants’ expectations; the most positive and beneficial aspect of the workshop; any aspects of the workshop participants would like to see strengthened and improved; and a how participants intended to apply what they had learnt to their current work. Overall the responses were positive and interestingly some common themes emerged, especially with regard to group work being very effective. Responses indicated that participants felt strongly that this was one of the most positive aspects of the workshop as it gave them an opportunity to share their ideas with peers and engage in valuable discussions. It was also an opportunity to brainstorm with other people and share areas of good
practice.

“Group work/discussion [was most positive aspect] as it provided a good opportunity to meet other people and share views.”

“Effective interacting with member from other (institutes/colleges] -Sharing views, experiences, difficulties etc.”

“Group discussion and participatory solution finding techniques are the most attractive concept.”

“The brainstorming was useful and the interaction with staff of other colleges was also helpful.”

The use of participative group methods modelled positive behaviours for group members as they were able to experience different facilitation and leadership styles as they moved from group to group. This inspired one participant to note:

“More control of the work within the group is required to defeat some of the bad habits of the members of the group especially the leaders of the group.”

Participants also seemed confident that they could replicate the group work techniques in their own work places:

“We shall apply this to the group work being done at (college] and also will be able to help departments in their QA work.”

“Will conduct a similar workshop at college and make everyone aware of strategic planning.”

“Planning to implement a similar workshop with staff so they feel as if they have participated too.”

“The methods provided were very useful and we can benefit from these and apply them at work.”

Due to the logistical difficulties in arranging small tables that seat 4 people for 80-100 people, the authors had modified the World Cafe by establishing groups of 8 people. Instead of moving the whole table each time a ‘move’ was called, only half the table moved whilst the other half remained. New members were briefed about the issues discussed to date and then a new facilitator 1 leader was chosen to carry the discussion forward. Some participants noted improvements that could have been made to these modifications in that perhaps going to a larger group size was not as effective, and that the number of movements within one session needed to be limited.

“Group size should be limited to 3 or 4 to get fast and concrete results. Better for consensus and to avoid “passengers” and have more “performers”.”

“Fewer moves of the group and less number of members in each group.”

DISCUSSION

The Large Group Methods deployed proved very effective in workshops on strategic planning and self assessment in institutions in Muscat. Participants enjoyed the opportunity to engage with peers and discuss topics together and also gain perspectives of different people. This created a genuine and positive atmosphere and observers could almost see (and most certainly hear) the ‘buzz’ that was created.

Positive attitudes by workshop participants towards participative methods used in group work was also found by Carroll & Palermo (2006) in their evaluation of the National Quality Training Program provided by the OAC and Ministry of Higher Education in 2006. Responses to the evaluations highlight that workshop participants found the group activities and feedback sessions to be the most beneficial part of the training module delivery (Carroll & Palermo, 2006).

The introduction of a new national regulatory system of quality audit and accreditation to a developing country such as Oman requires a parallel program that focuses on raising the capability of that sector. The workshops that have been discussed in this paper utilise large group methods that model values that are aligned to that of the national system as espoused in the Oman Accreditation Council’s Quality Manual (Carroll et al, 2008). The reconceptualisation required of the way in which higher education can operate effectively within the international higher education community is more likely to be achieved if the processes put in place to establish robust quality management systems are aligned to the principles that the OAC espouses from the outset. It follows that the methods used to gain consensus on strategic issues at the institutional level as institutions build their quality management systems and begin to change workplace practices accordingly should inherently comprise principles of participation, empowerment and peer based
leadership. We believe that large group methods can provide positive pathways to these outcomes.

REFERENCES

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