4-1-2010

Student and Facilitator Engagement to Develop Leadership Competencies in a Project-based Learning Environment

Amany Saleh

David Cox

Tammy Fowler

Bridget Duncan-Shemwell

Academic Leadership Journal

The purpose of this article is to examine how graduate educational leadership students engaged and developed competencies in a project-based learning environment. The project-based curriculum was designed to facilitate the development of team leadership skills as doctoral students applied the course concepts learned throughout their two-year cohort experience. The facilitator introduced the project-based group endeavor to the doctoral students in their first semester of course work. Periodically, the facilitator would meet with the students to acquire feedback on their progress. The group endeavor concluded in the last semester of coursework with students presenting their results before the doctoral faculty and other members of the academic community.

Two educational leadership doctoral students and two doctoral faculty members reflect on the process in this paper. The two students took active leadership roles in steering and finalizing the project. One faculty member provided the training of leadership theories during the doctoral course work, while the other faculty facilitated the group project. The faculty envisioned the doctoral project as an authentic capstone experience in which the doctoral students would demonstrate and apply their understanding of the leadership conceptual frameworks gained through their courses.

The doctoral students describe how the concepts taught in the doctoral program influenced their understanding and application of engagement and leadership in a project-based learning environment by using a conceptual framework of leadership theories advanced by Block (2008), Covey (2004), Heifetz and Linsky (2002), and Lencioni (2005). The faculty members discuss their observation of the dynamics of the process while providing insights for future practices. Additionally, the analysis provided here proposes new operating norms for exercising leadership to create a more productive project-based learning environment in the future.

Student Engagement in a Project-based Learning Environment

A discussion of the leadership theories learned during the doctoral coursework and Covey's four roles of leadership (modeling, pathfinding, aligning, and empowering) are applied to the cohort experience and group project. Covey (2004) explained that the modeling role of leadership is not only an individual role, but also the work of a team. Covey's concepts, when applied to a project-based learning environment, invite students to recognize their unique roles or contributions and the individual strengths of each member. Students build upon these strengths and compensate for the weaknesses of others. Students model a mutual respect for one another and do not blame others, avoid responsibility, complain, criticize, or play the victim role. Covey (2004) advised that members increase their influence and respect for one another by modeling trustworthy behaviors, seeking first to understand, and then to be understood.

Heifetz and Linsky (2005) explained that everyone in an organization can model leadership if they only will take the initiative to mobilize people in a way that positively affects the organization. Correspondingly, Covey (2004) explained that people in every organization could lead and influence

others no matter what position they hold. They can move themselves and a team in such a way that influences the organization, however small it may be. Applied to students, members can take the initiative and empower themselves by taking control or ownership of the group project and decide to do it the way they collectively see fit. Covey explained that taking the initiative requires vision, discipline, and a purpose or passion for doing it or, in this case, completing the project in a way that will move or motivate the group toward a worthy end result.

Based on Heifetz and Linsky's (2005) concepts, the group project was an adaptive challenge. The adaptive challenge of the group project was not possessing initially a shared vision of what the project would look like, the discipline or the know how to complete the project, and the passion or purpose for creating something together. Heifetz and Linsky contended that an adaptive challenge requires people to change their values, beliefs, and habits in order to face the reality of the adaptive challenge and to mobilize people to complete the work.

Covey (2004) explained that members should use the second leadership role of pathfinding to determine together what is most important to the group and collectively understand the realistic challenges faced by the group. This concept applied to the group project indicates that, once members understand the realities and agree upon what the group project will involve, the resultant knowledge forms the basis for the standards that will drive all decisions that follow. This conversation gives members an opportunity to develop the shared vision and values, establish the mission, and the strategic plan for the group project. This kind of pathfinding communication creates focus, stability, agility, and order within the group without demanding it (Covey 2004).

Block (2008) discussed five types of conversations for structuring and belonging: possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment, and gifts. Possibility is a conversation about the future and what the members can create together, such as the group project. The ownership discussion involves each member taking responsibility for what the members are creating. Dissent is invited into the conversation as a way to listen to doubts, show interest, respect, and value differences. Dissent becomes commitment and accountability when members stop trying to explain or answer it. The commitment conversation is a promise among members about their contributions to the success of the whole. The gift conversation in community building is to acknowledge and clarify members' strengths, capabilities, and contributions to the endeavor, instead of focusing on weaknesses or deficiencies (Block 2008).

Covey's (2004) concepts suggest that helping people clearly understand and commit to the group project requires involving members in the decision-making process. Together, the members determine the future or the vision/mission of the group project. Consequently, everyone has ownership of the project's values and strategic plan.

Covey's (2004) third role of leadership is alignment or asking one another for regular feedback. Members' contrasting progress and plan provides a way to check and stay in alignment with the guiding principles and the commitment to goal or project completion. The idea of alignment is to create systems or standards that reinforce the shared values of the members. Members align their project goals with the shared vision, purpose, and adjust accordingly based on the regular feedback received from the members. The constant feedback is an opportunity for the members to check their progress and realign with the original criteria. The group project should reflect the criteria that were established by the members. This method allows members to continuously stay aligned with the process and be

responsible and accountable for project completion.

The last role of leadership is empowerment. Covey (2004) proclaimed that empowerment of people results from modeling, path finding, and aligning. People not empowered have no common vision, no discipline, and no passion. The empowerment of members produces trustworthiness, which influences members to discover and set free their human potential. If collaboration can exist between students and the facilitator at the project level, the partnership will empower students with passion and motivation leading to mutually enjoyed accomplishment.

Facilitating the Development of Leadership Competencies

in a Project-based Learning Environment

Leaders apply the principles advanced by Block (2008), Heifetz and Linsky (2002), and Lencioni (2005) by creating opportunities for group members to address environmental challenges by building teams, engaging, and learning new operating norms. Applied to a project-based learning environment, team building involves discovering the purpose, taking responsibility for the work, and adjusting values and mindsets to adapt and mobilize students. The facilitator views operating in teams as an opportunity for all members to adopt, build, and implement leadership skills in an open, emergent work culture. Facilitators believe team building meets the members' need for engagement and having a sense of purpose. The work and learning experiences are shared and used as a resource for further learning and working.

Leadership activities that develop team building involve establishing trust, engaging in open communication, commitment to decisions, accountability, and aligning behaviors with work practices to produce collective results (Lencioni 2005). The development of team building competencies encourages a collaborative work culture. Members take ownership of the work culture when they are involved in the team and decision-making processes. This inclusion encourages members to challenge their own work practices and to promote teamwork or collaboration among members by applying team-building strategies.

Block (2008) described the facilitator of the group as creating conditions and experiences designed to engage others in a committed and accountable way. Block's concept applied to a project-based learning environment indicates that the intent of meetings or gatherings is to engage members to want to create a project together. The point of any group gathering is to strengthen accountability and commitment through engagement. Engagement with others produces caring for the well-being of the whole (Block 2008). The responsibility of each member is to be engaged in the group project and to advance the work culture toward shared ownership, accountability, and commitment to one another.

Members should take responsibility for their own experiences and actions according to the well-being of the whole group. Taking responsibility for one's own behavior removes placing blame, name-calling, gossip, and faultfinding. Asking people to take ownership of their own experiences and to act in the best interests of others brings people together instead of creating division and isolation. This kind of relationship is engagement-centered and produces energy among its members rather than draining time and energy from others by disagreeing or debating over issues (Block 2008).

The engagement-centered relationship uses a partnership model to energize the group. Each

gathering illustrates the work environment members want to create. If members have this mindset, they will model and create the kind of environment within which they want to work. To build a partnership with members, participants must value diversity of thinking and dissent, make commitments openly, and acknowledge the strengths of each person. The way members gather and interact is as important as what they gather to discuss or resolve (Block 2008).

The way people gather determines if they function in isolation or experience a sense of belonging to the group (Block 2008). Without a sense of belonging, the group project would be difficult to create and complete. Every group has different personalities and agendas making it more challenging to cooperate. The best way to create connections and mobilize people is to have them identify what needs to occur in order to move the group forward (Block 2008). This approach puts the responsibility or work back on the members to resolve their own differences and to become shared owners of the group and accountable for the group project.

The conversation among members of the group needs to focus on the possibilities of the group project that they collectively seek to create. Block (2008) explained that the members are responsible for relating to one another and creating the work environment together. The focus of the conversation is not on the final product, but on asking and answering questions about the members' present work habits. In answering these questions, people take ownership in creating and participating in the present work situation (Block 2008). The goal of the facilitator is not to give advice, but rather to empower group members to examine how they act when the situation is not working and the extent to which members act as owners of the work situation to determine how they perform as owners of the project.

Shared ownership of an activity gives members a purpose and a plan for reaching their desired goals together. The act of relatedness creates a sense of belonging among members. Ultimately, being engaged and making connections with others is what matters most in any gathering (Block 2008). This strategy applied to a project-based learning environment allows members to choose accountability and commitment to one another in working toward the group project goal. Having a sense of belonging to the group, knowing how members' strengths contribute to the purpose or project goal, and demonstrating shared ownership of the project encourage the alignment of behaviors and work practices.

Behaviors and work practices align with the mutually agreed core values or priorities to demonstrate commitment and accountability (Lencioni 2005). This principle encourages the facilitator to establish trust and recognize the core values and the top collective priority of students. After students identify the core values or priorities, they communicate the core values to promote accountability. The facilitator understands that students communicating a desired shared commitment are more likely to use their energy to produce significant results. Organizational core values invite self-regulating behavior, learning, and innovation to develop, with value-based objectives emerging from the process (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). The facilitator chooses actions or behaviors that reflect core values and implement innovative work strategies and leadership practices to adjust operating norms and promote open systems thinking. Members construct an open system in a way that creates a space in which many possible actions and behaviors can emerge including those that question operating norms (Morgan 2006; Owen 2008).

New Operating Norms in a Project-based Learning Environment

Viewing teams as information systems, communication systems, and decision-making systems, leaders emphasize communication and learning from one another to build an open system through means of observation, interpretation, intervention, and plan of action (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). Applying this principle to the development of leadership competencies, a facilitator encourages students to observe, interpret, and communicate information that influences new operating behaviors. The facilitator acknowledges that traditional modes of operation and rational systems thinking can create work avoidance and communication avoidance. The learning environment can adjust operating practices and strategies to meet changing needs and avoid being bound by past patterns of behavior, decision-making, and defensive routines (Heifetz and Linsky 2002).

If leaders practice the four learning tools of observation, interpretation, intervention, and plan of action as recommended by Heifetz and Linsky (2002) in a project-based learning environment, the result is a continuous process of information exchange. This exchange process allows the system to monitor changes and initiate appropriate responses. The system operates in an intelligent, self-regulating manner with operating norms or standards determining the procedures and policies (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). The facilitator understands that, to adapt in a changing environment, students must learn to identify the assumptions and norms that influence present circumstances. The facilitator encourages students to adjust work practices to meet the individual needs, situations, or circumstances of all members operating in the system.

If leaders seek to discover ways to promote productive disequilibrium, they work collectively with others to find ways of embracing uncertainty so that new patterns of action can emerge (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). Applying this principle to student leadership competency development, a facilitator builds a learning environment that embraces, utilizes, and even creates uncertainty as a valuable source for new development, learning, and work practice. The facilitator encourages dialogue, the expression of dissent, and conflicting viewpoints as resources for new learning and adaptive change. Facilitators develop cultural norms that embrace communication and risk-taking, recognizing that problems and errors are inevitable in a changing environment. The facilitator strives to help students develop leadership competencies and reinforce mindsets that embrace environmental change as a normal condition. The facilitator realizes that people envisioning the group project and work practices in new and different ways are able to create new operating norms.

When leaders encourage dialogue and partnerships, they establish a learning environment in which desirable futures, appropriate strategies, and methods of organizational operation can emerge (Block 2008). Instead of focusing on the technical aspects of solving problems, people view work as an adaptive challenges by testing existing paradigms with reflection, brainstorming, and action planning to produce new strategic paths and to align work practices (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). Applying these principles to leadership competency development, the facilitator encourages students to challenge operating norms and to work collaboratively to share issues and problems in finding ways to improve the work system.

The Cohort

Cohort XV of the Doctorate in Educational Leadership was a diverse group of individuals. The cohort began with 14 members; however, the cohort lost two members before the group project began and another member after the first year. The resulting project work group was comprised of one male, ten females; four African Americans, seven Caucasians. There were five individuals affiliated with

postsecondary institutions, two from two-year institutions, three from four-year institutions, one of which was a private religious-based university. Elementary and secondary educators made up the rest of the group with three school administrators and four elementary faculty members. Ages of cohort members ranged from 25 years to 55 years. The cohort represented over 150 years of educational leadership/teaching experience.

The Project

Previous cohorts had the option of completing a group project as part of the comprehensive exam portion of the doctoral program in Educational Leadership. The group project was one of four options of which members had to complete three. The four options were: written comprehensive exam, reflective portfolio, publication/grant/national or regional presentation, or a group project. Each prior cohort had members attempt a group project. However, projects did not meet the expectations of the faculty. Prior group projects did not incorporate cohort coursework and/or experience for the following reasons. The depth of analysis was not reflective of doctoral work. The resultant presentations did not provide new insights and applications of the cohort experience and learning. Therefore, the doctoral faculty approached cohort XV with a mandatory group project. All members of the cohort would work on the project together. Cohort XV members would then choose two of the other options; written comprehensive exam, publication/grant/national or regional presentation, or reflective portfolio to meet their candidacy requirements.

The doctoral faculty selected one of them to serve as facilitator for the group experience. Her responsibility was to define the cohort project theme, guide the cohort in selection of individual contributions to the group project, and supervise the development of the final group product. The theme chosen for this cohort was "Curriculum Wars." The facilitator would meet at appointed times during the two year coursework with the cohort to work on the project. She would also come to selected courses to help lead discussion and analysis of the course as it related to the cohort project theme. The doctoral students were to agree on a final product to present to the faculty, but the emphasis was on the process. The cohort agreed on producing a monograph which would contain individual papers all related to the theme but represent the student' interest and pertain to the level of students with which he/she usually works.

The goals of the cohort project were:

1. To demonstrate understanding of the factors that affect the curriculum by integrating knowledge gained through the program of study.

2. To demonstrate awareness of the powers that impact the field of education by consistently analyzing such impact in light of the knowledge gained from classes and experiences.

3. To evaluate current curricular practices in light of the recent changes in the education field, educational theories, and research covered in the program of study.

4. To investigate in depth a problem or issue applying knowledge gained from course work and life experience in theoretical context.

5. To practice collaborative leadership skills by working independently with a group of colleagues to

produce an exemplary product.

6. To disseminate findings in a professional, formal format appropriate for doctoral students.

The facilitator guided cohort members through an evaluation of current curricular practices by examining recent changes in the education field, new educational theories applied in elementary, secondary and postsecondary education, and research uncovered in the program of study. Other faculty in the doctoral program agreed to integrated discussions regarding curriculum in their coursework throughout the two year program of study. Cohort members were encouraged to integrate the cohort project outcomes into the individual course assignments as appropriate.

Cohort Member Engagement in the Cohort Project

The cohort members were exposed to the group project at the onset of the doctoral experience. Meetings with the facilitator began during the first week of the program. The theme was communicated before any in-depth analysis in the coursework had been performed. As a result, the group did not have the opportunity to practice the leadership role of modeling. While members began to recognize the individual strengths of each cohort member, they also identified their weaknesses. Without the time to formally investigate the strengths and weaknesses of themselves personally, few cohort members felt the need to provide their own analysis of other members' strengths and weakness. Having ones weaknesses pointed out by other cohort members did not support the function of modeling as defined by Covey. Mutual respect was not developed, blame was often passed around, responsibilities were avoided, and complaints and criticism were offered in an unconstructive manner.

Cohort members also initially did not take the opportunity to develop a shared vision or values. Discussions were not held that dealt with the way the group would function, what the mission would be nor definition of a strategic plan for accomplishing the group project. The cohort members jumped too quickly into their individual projects and the actual "product" of the project and not how the work would be accomplished. They employed the default approach to "group work" of "division of labor" than a true collaborate approach. The challenges the group would face were not recognized and standards for participation, behavior, and work product were nonexistent. As a result, the group floundered for over a year on the outcomes of the project. Without a good work process, the product could not be defined. The cohort lacked focus and stability because there were not standards used to frame future decisions the group would have to make.

An analysis of the engagement of the cohort members in the cohort project uncovered the realization that the cohort project was an adaptive challenge as defined by Heifetz and Linsky (2005). However, cohort members approached the project as a technical problem. The cohort jumped into solving the technical problem of producing 11 individual papers that can be integrated into a monograph.

What is interesting is that each cohort member's individual engagement in the project mirrored that member's level of engagement found in the classroom and throughout the cohort experience over the two years. Each cohort member's method of engagement in the classroom, whether or not he/she was taking up the gauntlet of adaptive change on him/herself, spread to the group project work time. Individuals who were practicing avoidance in the classroom carried this over to the project work. Those members who practiced self-examination and began to recognize their own unique role or contribution brought this to the group work. As a result, two subgroups emerged. There were those cohort members

who desired to grow from a group experience, as well as, produce a quality research project. Others wanted no challenge; no change in their personal beliefs and habits. They merely wanted to write a paper and be done.

The dichotomy of the two subgroups made Block's concepts of community ownership, commitment, and dissent impossible. Members did focus on ownership in that they did take responsibility for their own work; however, the Block concept was missed because members did not relate their personal commitment to the work of the group, only their individual parts. As a result, they were not committed to the group project and felt no responsibility for its outcome beyond their own individual piece. For example, two group members were constantly late or right up to the deadline with their contributions to the group. Their work was done, personal responsibility was achieved; however, the last minute behavior and lack of collaboration with other members resulted in a lack of ownership in the group project. Members formulated their own personal commitment to the project without consideration or discussion as to how it would contribute to the success of the whole.

Dissent was evident in the cohort process; however, it was not welcome. Individuals were not listened to with respect. A few members were not interested in the varying viewpoints of other cohort members. When differences of view or values were expressed, they were met with defensiveness, lack of interest, and often hostility. As a result, alignment was not achieved. Regular feedback became too painful for many members to experience. Since no criteria or standards for the group project process were developed at the onset, dissent and/or feedback did not allow members to align themselves with anything. This kept the individual nature of the group project alive which left the group with no shared vision, no discipline, and no passion for the project. Individual cohort members were not empowered to discover and set free their human potential. This lack of development impaired the process and marred the product. Individual cohort members did not feel safe enough to challenge themselves or each other. The cohort did not trust one another to push the envelope of their beliefs and values as they related to curriculum development, theory, and practice.

Development of Leadership Competencies through the Cohort Project

The implementation of the cohort project missed a unique opportunity to encourage the cohort to practice team building. By defining the theme for the group project, doctoral faculty did not allow the cohort to discover its own purpose. One of the most important aspects of group work is the possession of a shared, common vision; a vision built together. During the cohort process, faculty often expressed concern over the cohort's tie to a patriarchal system of education. The cohort wanted very detailed description of what was expected of them, what the assignments entailed, what behaviors were expected, and more importantly, what behaviors/work would be rewarded. By defining the topic for the group, the faculty reinforced the patriarchy: "We will tell you what we want and you will produce it." The cohort was not afforded this experience. As a result, members did not gain the experience of working in a group to define a common goal which resulted in a lack of commitment to the project, no true sense of purpose, and disengagement.

Communication was another obstacle for the group. Group gatherings should engage the members and strengthen accountability and commitment through open communication. Cohort members were very good at talking, but not often that good at listening. It seemed a few members of the cohort were more interested in sharing their views, opinions, and values than listening to others. They would demand attention through their verbal language, body stance, tone, and volume. The use of hot words,

words which were chosen often to illict a specific, often negative response. As a result, members often felt isolated; both those who spoke up and those who did not. The verbal ones found themselves isolated when the majority of the group did not respond to their coercive statements. Other members felt constricted with the tension and anger resulting from many of the conversations. Diversity of thought and the more positive dissent were replaced with blame, faultfinding, and frustration.

Shared ownership of an activity gives members a purpose and a plan for reaching their desired goals together. The cohort never developed shared ownership of the group project. Organizational core values were not defined and, as a result, self-regulating behavior, learning, and innovation did not grow. The group project process did not give the cohort time to develop a work environment together. Questions were not addressed which dealt with members' work habits, values, goals, and operating norms. The cohort jumped right into the work and did not take time to nurture the process.

New Operating Norms Vital to Cohort Project Success

The traditional modes of operation and rational systems thinking practiced by the cohort created work avoidance and communication voids. The cohort should have first taken time to observe how each member worked. Each member's assumptions and norms that influence his/her present circumstances should have been identified, owned, and communicated to the other cohort members. This would have freed the cohort members to more effectively interpret each other's behaviors. Interventions could then have been made at points in the process when individual needs, circumstances, or situations changed. The disequilibrium necessary for growth in the system would then have been seen as an opportunity for new learning and adaptive change. The cohort would have been more inclined to take risks because the cultural norms of the group would have developed out of trust, mutual consent, and a shared vision.

The cohort approached the group project with very traditional leadership methods. This was due, in part, to the early initiation into the group project. The cohort began the group experience before they had the opportunity to practice the new norms they were learning in the classroom. Had the cohort been given more time to practice working in a group before the initiation of the group project, the outcomes may have been more positive. If there had been more experiences in each of the courses that not only allowed implementation of the cohort project theme, but also smaller group projects, skills could have possibly been developed earlier and then applied to the larger group project. It definitely would have given the cohort time to understand one another, define each other's work styles, and given members a foundation from which to respond more positively to the dissent when it surfaced. And those who were dissenters would have been able to develop their communication skills to the point where their message was not over powered by their words, tone, or body language.

Unfortunately, the resulting group project did not inculcate the cohort learning over the program of study. Individual course projects were not instructive to the project product. The cohort did not produce a cohesive monograph or seminar. It was very much 11 individual research projects. Much of the outcome was instructive; however, it did not reflect the culmination of a two-year process as the faculty had hoped. Had the group been left free to develop their project theme and more time to grow their own work system, a different result would surely have come. The group would have been more self-regulating as they would have been able to assess each individual's competencies and then let them work out of those strengths instead of making them adapt to the mold defined by the faculty. Would it have been what the faculty wanted? Maybe not, but the cohort would have created an open system

environment with the resulting group effort owned by the cohort, demonstrating their learning, or lack thereof, boldly and brilliantly.

The Facilitator View

The facilitator of this project attempted to empower the students by providing them with limited guidelines for the project. The faculty members chose a generic theme that can apply to all levels and all fields in order to give the students a starting point to think about as they brainstormed about the nature of their final project. However, the doctoral faculty by choosing the theme inadvertently destroyed ownership and accountability of the project. Interestingly, few cohort members commented that if a theme was not chosen for them, they may have argued over the topic for the two years! The facilitator acted as a coach and a resource person for the cohort members. Early in the process, she was asked about the kinds of projects that are acceptable to the doctoral faculty. She gave them several examples of earlier projects and the cohort members agreed on producing a monograph which will include individual papers prepared by them and related to their interests and areas of expertise. The cohort members were expected to negotiate and produce a coherent structure to guide their project work. This structure was to have clearly defined roles for the cohort members and a set of guidelines for their capstone experience. The faculty members anticipated that cohort members will apply their knowledge of leadership theories introduced during course work to their project. However, cohort members continued to ask for a prescriptive structure and a set of established rules to be provided by the facilitator to guide their work in the project. As the facilitator continued to insist that they have to develop their own rules, cohort members' frustration with the project kept mounting. Paulo Freire (1970) stated that to successfully empower students, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (p. 59). The cohort members could not ignore the facilitator authority as a faculty member and did not attempt to assert their authority as the owners of the project.

This group of students, many of them held leadership roles in their perspective institutions at the highest level of their educational journey, were the victims of a lifelong schooling experience which is highly prescriptive and unchallenging. As a result, they failed to appreciate the challenge they were offered and perceived the "designed" lack of structure as a shortcoming of the facilitator. This is not unlike our current national dilemma regarding healthcare debate. President Obama asked Congress to produce an acceptable healthcare reform that is inclusive and affordable for all while restraining himself from imposing guidelines on such reform. He hoped that through rational debate, legislators will be empowered to come to an agreement on a suitable healthcare reform, yet, he was strongly criticized as unable to provide clear directions and leadership to the country.

The doctoral students, in this project, perceived the freedom they were given to establish their own guidelines as a hindrance to their learning process. The facilitator of the project assumed that through the struggle to work together on the project, cohort members will be able to take the lead and ownership of the project. However, many of the cohort members failed to seize this opportunity and treated the project as another course project carried out for a grade. Cohort members and facilitators were unsure how to handle conflicts. Cohort members wanted the facilitator to step in and resolve the issues decisively, while the facilitator expected them to come up with resolutions of their own based on what they have learned. In the end, it appeared the both parties were running from the conflicts rather than confronting them. The relationship between the course content and the nature of the project was

lost on many of the cohort members.

Conclusion

The adaptive challenge of the group project was finding ways to promote open systems thinking and decision-making that takes students beyond the rationality model. For leadership competencies to develop in a project-based learning environment, students need to understand one another's values, expectations, and purposes for being in the environment. Facilitation involves building the foundation for an open and evolving learning environment that creates a place in which growth and innovation can occur. The students' collective purpose, values, and methods of operating develop with each changing circumstance, group, or learning experience.

The facilitator provides opportunities for innovation and sharing of information to occur. The sharing of information is a source of accountability and commitment to the group. Students partake in dialogue so that each person is able to engage in a range of functions to develop more effective ways of approaching work. As students recognize, absorb, and deal with their work environment, they will become more effective in dealing with adaptive challenges. To respond to adaptive challenges, students' values, beliefs, habits, and ways of working transform to adjust to the open system environment.

An open system environment consisting of vibrant information exchange, shared sense of purpose, and collective values encourages a self-differentiated culture with individual characteristics. Roles are broadly defined with individuals practicing leadership competencies that are interchangeable and flexible. Students learn from one another and embrace adaptive challenges through the project-based experience. Students diagnose, analyze, and find collective solutions to adaptive challenges. The group self-regulates and the facilitator supports the decision-making process. The facilitator mobilizes students to perform the tasks needed for being an engaged learner and exercising leadership competencies.

In an attempt to turn the above experience into lessons learned, the doctoral faculty developed new guidelines to provide structure for future group projects. These guidelines are introduced in Appendix A.

References

Block, P. 2008. Community: The structure of belonging. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Covey, S. R. 2004. The 8th habit: From effectiveness to greatness. New York: Simon-Schuster.

Freire, P. 1970. Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Seabury

Heifetz, R. A., and M. Linsky. 2002. Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Lencioni, P. 2005. Overcoming the five dysfunctions of a team: A field guide for leaders, managers, and facilitators. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Morgan, G. 2006. Images of organization: Updated edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage

Publications.

Owen, H. 2008. Open space technology: A user's guide, 3rd ed., San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler

Appendix A

Doctoral Program: Group Project Guidelines

Introduction

A "group project" is one of four options for completing the comprehensive exam requirement. The other three are: scholarly presentation/publication, portfolio, and traditional written exam. Of the four options, students must successfully complete three.

Expectations

The faculty expect to see group members working together to create a product larger and more comprehensive than one individual could do working alone. In the process of learning about self-organizing systems and group dynamics, group members are expected to demonstrate competency in shared leadership responsibility for carrying out a challenging, truly "group" undertaking (not the default division-of-labor syndrome). This means collaborative decision-making from initial organization to a product that clearly documents an outcome greater than the sum of the parts (i.e., synergy).

The faculty also expects students to assess themselves, the group process, and one another in terms of effective and ineffective leadership interventions. The group will be expected to address any internal conflict issues that might arise pertaining to an unbalanced share of the work load. While the project is a component of the comprehensive exam, it is also a learning exercise and leadership laboratory for sharpening skills to transfer into "back home" teamwork settings.

The focus for the group project is initiated by the group and is fairly wide open, but a proposal does have to be approved by the faculty by May 1 of the first year of study. Examples of project possibilities are: (1) a field project with specific learning objectives involving travel within or outside the United States (e.g., model program, professional conference), (2) a consulting project with a school or college (or sub-component thereof), (3) an advisory role to an educational agency, and (4) a critical analysis of a major educational reform issue with problem identification, background research, methodology, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations culminating in a "white paper" monograph.

Procedures and Timeline

In the spring term of the first year of the cohort's existence, students will identify themselves as wanting to pursue the "group project" option. Member self-identification takes place before any topics are floated. Group composition can range from a minimum of three cohort members to all cohort members. There can be only one group project per cohort, and no student who wishes to participate in a group project will be excluded.

An organization meeting will then be set up at a time convenient to group members and a faculty process observer. At the organization meeting, steps will be initiated to develop a project proposal.

Subsequent meetings may be necessary to deliver a proposal to the faculty by April 1 of the first year of study. The month of April may be needed to hold negotiations between the group members and the faculty in order to have an approved project in place by May 1.

The proposal will present the overall purpose of the project, goals, rationale for the project's significance, roles, procedures, and what product will be produced by when. The proposal (group charter) will be signed by all group members.

The roles section should address: individual responsibility assignments, time commitments, timelines, and self-assessment and peer-assessment agreements and tools.

The procedures section should address: ground rules for behavior, group meetings, guidelines for communication, making decisions, experiencing conflict, and handling accountability issues (e.g., free riders, slackers, dropouts).

The group project is initiated in the spring term of the first year of study and is expected to be completed and accepted by the faculty by May 1 of the second year of study. This gives the group members one full year to carry out the study to completion. If a proposal is not approved by May 1 of the first year, students would need to complete the remaining three comp options. This would also be the case if the final product is not approved by the faculty by May 1 of the second year.

The group project is a totally student-driven enterprise from conception through completion. While faculty have evaluation responsibilities for the proposal and the final product, the faculty will not direct how and when the group goes about its business. However, faculty are interested in facilitating learning as a result of group process interactions.

Faculty Process Observer

Please plan to invite a faculty process observer to each group meeting. The process observer's role is to help the group debrief group dynamics at the end of each working session – for the purpose of enhancing team building skills. Please schedule meeting times and locations convenient to a faculty process observer.

Authorship/Ownership

Each member of the group is an equal owner of the intellectual property of the project. That means that any paper, poster, presentation, etc. that might arise from the work must list every member as an author. Even if a group member adapts the deliverables long after the project has ended to present at a meeting or submit for a paper, every group member should be listed as an author.

Deliverables

The major deliverables for the group project are: a proposal, an extensive final written report, a four page summary of the project, and an oral presentation. The final written report should include a: problem statement, background research and literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, conclusions, recommendations, and references. The oral presentation should include a thirty minute overview of the project allowing another thirty minutes for questions and answers from the audience (faculty plus invited guests).

An accepted proposal is due by May 1 of the first year of study. All other deliverables are due by May 1 of the second year of study.

Evaluation

What will it look like when we are successful?

The faculty will evaluate the final project according the following criteria:

· Group members self-organized, planned, and implemented a significant investigation from beginning through completion

· The group accomplished its purpose and goals

· The group demonstrated creative and critical thinking

· The group practiced leadership skills learned during the program

· The group engaged in a mutual peer assessment exercise connected to learning how to function more effectively in group settings

· The group produced a scholarly, well-organized, and well-written professional document (with potential for presentation and/or publication)

VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]