

QUALITY CIRCLES AND INTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL GROUP COHESIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to examine the relationship between quality circles and intra-organizational group cohesiveness. The paper is designed as a theoretical paper, and discussed content bothering in the role of quality circles in enhancing group intra-organizational group cohesiveness. The results are based on an observed aggregate of studies that identify the imperatives of quality circles as substantial and adequate in facilitating improved outcomes of intra-organizational group cohesiveness. In conclusion, this paper affirms that quality circles are useful in addressing both operational and diversity challenges of the organization, and that through the adequate design and structuring of their activities, can substantially contribute towards improved outcomes of intra-organizational group cohesiveness. It was recommended that (a) The design and structuring of such circles should be premised on policies and control frameworks which drive the collaborative processes and interaction between members of the circle in a way that enhances their levels of correspondence and dependence on each other, and that (b) The formats of such circles should also allow for interactive sessions that pool in every member at particular times and which emphasizes on the participation and involvement of all members

KEYWORDS: Quality circles, intra-organizational group cohesiveness, collaboration, trust, social identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Cohesiveness in groups is not considered as common place, even when it appears to occur when members of a group tend to enjoy relatively robust social network of relationships and trust within themselves. The possibility of sticking together borders around the propensity of group cohesiveness, because cohesive groups have several positive qualities that are noticeable with a shared perception of bonding and togetherness, suggesting substantial levels of trust and correspondence among group members, while upholding the standard norms of the group (Langfred, 2000). Intra-organizational group cohesiveness as a concept has been around as long as employees within the organization have tended to categorize and identify with certain groups or parties within the organization. It describes the level or extent to which members bond, value and identify with each other within particular groups within the organization (Change & Bordia, 2001).

Studies reveal that given the growing complexities and work complications experienced by employees within their work settings due to globalization and increased workplace diversity, most organizations are constantly plagued by constant conflict between groups and poor levels of collaboration, leading to low productivity and poor organizational performance. Consequently, intra-organizational group cohesiveness can be described as essential in the sense that it tends to represent the resultant forces pressing on all groups within the organization to remain faithful and loyal to the overall goals and objectives of the organization (Whitney, 1994). Put clearly, intra-organizational group cohesiveness arises when particular group members demonstrate great level of bonding with members of other groups within the same organization on the basis of both tasks and social functions. It is considered a key indicator of the level of trust and value groups hold of themselves and of other groups within their range or proximity. Intra-organizational group cohesiveness therefore implies a condition within which members of different groups within the same organization are willing and capable of trusting each other and collaborating on particular jobs or functions in the best interest of the organization (Festinger et al., 1950).

Originally, cohesiveness in groups was believed to have evolved from the considerations of bonding and committing to the group task and identity (Langfred, 2000), to interpersonal attraction due to differences or group diversity. Unlike in the

past, when organizations were generally homogeneous due to sexual category (masculinity or femininity), ethnic group or skill; a classic example is a scenario in which functional workgroups (this represents two or more individuals who routinely function as a team, and are interdependent in achieving the predetermined or common goal) in organizations were composed of individuals with similar training and backgrounds from the same ethnic group (Langfred, 2000), which is obviously no longer the case as certain dynamic forces now influence diversity in workgroups.

Literature (Mudrack, 1989; Elangovan, 2001; Dwyer, 2007) suggests that in driving intra-organizational group cohesiveness, several practices have been adopted. Majority of these practices have been domiciled on the use of human resources management practices; emphasizing on features such as training and employee orientation. However, as Chiang and Bordia (2001) argued, the development or shifts in behavioural tendencies from distrust to trust and from aversion to supportive, are such that require interaction and correspondence between parties in a manner that facilitates understanding, mutual dependence and increased collaboration. While previous studies have often discussed and offered content on various methods of value inculcation through constant training and orientation, this study departs as it specifies the need for increased collaboration frameworks and platforms such as quality circles. Quality circles describe work-focused groups which are designed to address particular issues and problems pertinent to the organization (Dwyer, 2007; Lincoln & Kalleberg, 2003). One major basis for member inclusion is their skill or level of experience with regards to the observed challenge, hence quality circles are often composed of individuals which can be described as being substantially dispensed on the basis of their categorizations in different groups which are highly dissimilar but with the individuals united on the basis of addressing the stated problem or challenge of the organization, based on their expertise and experience. This paper therefore addresses the relationship between quality circles and intra-organizational group cohesiveness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical framework (Social identity theory)

The social identity theory posits that a portion of the individual's self-concept is dependent on the importance and relevance placed on the group membership to which such an individual belongs (Turner & Oakes, 1986). The position of the theory follows that the individuals' drive for positive identity and esteem influences the social comparisons they make (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In particular, group comparisons that accentuate group distinctiveness in favour of one's ingroup over a relevant outgroup are privileged. As a result, when a particular group becomes salient, the features associated with that group guide one's attitudes and behaviours. This implies that the individual will most likely be influenced to identify with groups that have stronger identities and offer better placements and status for them.

Dwyer (2007) argued that when individuals find themselves within groups that yet accommodate their various levels of diversity, such differences across groups are highlighted and disparities within sub-categories are trivialized (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). In this way, overarching groups with stronger identities and prospects have a tendency of trivializing the differences which may exist between group members who may have been sourced from different categories as well (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). The social identity theory in this way identifies the content and qualities of groups as important features which may enhance or hamper member's sense of belongingness and identification with the group. Some of the implications of the social identity theory for this paper are as follows:

- i. The theory's postulations of strong group identity and the tendency for such in enhancing members sense of belongingness and willingness to collaborate and be at one with other members of the group is expressed in the purposiveness and meaning quality circles offer organizational members; thus implying a tendency for them to be more willing to collaborate with individuals considered as different but within the same quality circle
- ii. The theory's position on the trivialization of existing differences and dissimilarities due to the quality and depth of responsibility offered in their membership of groups such as circles is also important in understanding possible behavioural changes by individuals towards other members of their quality circles who probably prior to the formation of such circles weren't particularly close or supportive of.
- iii. The position offered by the theory with respect to emerging trust-based relationships formed based on acquaintance through interaction, collaboration and constant correspondence in view of shared missions, objectives or goals such as offered the members of quality circles.

2.2 Quality circles

Quality circles can be described as a group consisting of internal organizational members, comprising between 3 to 15 members (Langfred, 2000). Studies (Chinen & Enomoto, 2004) indicate that the circles more often consist of eight members. In most of cases, the members of the circle perform the same activities, and voluntarily participate in the circle, in other cases they are appointed and commissioned with tasks that are considered as primary to their job (Chinen & Enomoto, 2004). The members of the circle are the employees who can have influence in problem solving or to those members affected by the problems. They often meet once a week, meetings that approximately last an hour. During the meetings, the members of the circle analyse the issues and challenges of the organization. After the frequent meetings, the members of quality circles

propose the solutions of the problems that are closely related to their daily activities. In order to come up with the best problem solutions, the members have to attend the induction trainings by using the newest methods and techniques (Park, 1991).

Quality circles are led by designated supervisors or individuals (still employees) elected or appointed by the members of the circles (Langfred, 2000). Quality circles are established by the management leadership, where beside the internal members, also a member from another department outside the circle has been elected, whose task is to observe the way the circle has been led. Once the proposal has been selected by the members, the managers should give maximum support to the implementation of the decision taken. In case of failure to apply the solutions offered by the employees, then they will have no motivation to work further, because the company will not respect their opinions or them. All this, reduces the motivation of the employees, and contribute in continuation of the existing mistakes and even increase them (Langfred, 2000).

The effectiveness and success of the activities of quality circles are directly related to the evidence or practice of democratic leadership, especially that which allows for participation and involvement (Sanjay & O'Shaughnessy, 1998, Langfred, 2000). If management operates in an autocratic way, then it will disable the proper function of quality circles. The implementation of quality circles is not easy. Problems derived from using the quality circles, in most cases, are caused by the managers who perceive threats to their positions. But the facts indicate the contrary, as the purpose of the circles is not to jeopardize the position of managers, but, rather, by gaining better results, they strengthen their position. Extant literature (Chinen & Enomoto, 2004; Park, 1991) depicts the quality circles as a formal, institutionalized mechanism for productive and participative problem-solving interaction among the workers of an organization. Quality circles consist of small group of employees from all levels of the organization, who are either selected by the management or voluntarily involved in the process of identifying, analysing and formulating solutions to various technical, manual and automation related problems encountered in daily work life. The important feature of the quality circle is that the basic philosophy, preamble, time and budget allocation is formulated by the organization itself and the members of each quality circle prepare the target criteria and outline the objectives as well as work culture for the circle.

Once a particular organization adopts the practice of quality circle as part of their culture and functions, it is the foremost duty of the organization to orientate its workers about their multiple roles as participants, enablers and change agents for the organization. Since it is a collective work of the employees, the success depends largely on the organization's support and commitment for the formation of quality circles, and necessary assistance for knowledge dissemination among various quality circles of the same organization and outside the organization. The technical, manual and automation related working knowledge generated through quality circles needs to be transferred and diffused at all levels in the organization and has to be driven towards research and development of the organization (Sanjay & O'Shaughnessy, 1998).

The organization needs to endorse all the achievements of the quality circle as a group effort, and individual preferences or desires must be ignored. Successful quality circle help in upholding the morale, team spirit and participative partnership of the employees of organization, a visible and real support of organization is required to continue the quality circle process. It is observed that effective and efficient output from quality circles improves the overall output of the organization in terms of production, manpower and quality of work life, as the suggestions of improvement is directly proposed by the employees based on their assessment and experience of every work (Maheshwari, 1987). Although quality circle is a voluntary process by employees, the organization needs to recognize the time and labour spent on a regular basis and should necessarily reward with additional remuneration to all the members of the quality circles. This is as the top management personnel need to ensure that adequate resources are made available from time to time to continue the process.

Quality circles also have the reciprocal responsibility of presenting the plan and goals of their activities or work, target achievement charts, time and budget requirements on a periodic or consistent basis, not only to the senior management personnel or the financial personnel but also to all the employees of the organization which instils confidence and solidarity among all. Although uninterrupted supply of resources and support of the management of an organization definitely brings a positive change in quality of work life, the real success of the quality circle process lies in the strict implementation of its findings and leading to a breakthrough in research and development cell of the organization. (Sanjay & O'Shaughnessy, 1998). Some notable dimensions or features of quality circles are premised on the related activities of the circle. These include strategic-based quality circles and functional based quality circles.

Strategic-based quality circles: These are quality circles which are based on the assembling of teams which are designed and structured to offer support for strategic issues such as long-terms goals and plans of the organization. In this way, they are structured to assist management in decision-making and in providing ideas to long-terms goals and objectives of the organization (Sanjay & O'Shaughnessy, 1998).

Functional-based quality circles: These describe quality circles that are based on the day-to-day functionality and problems of the organization. This form of quality circles is structured to address the functional problems and technicalities of the organization especially in line with their market demands and the expectations of their customers. This is a more common form of quality circles as it is more frequent within service organizations dealing with adaptation and service quality (Sanjay & O'Shaughnessy, 1998).

2.3 Group cohesiveness

Group cohesiveness has been studied for nearly sixty years; however, the definition and operationalization of cohesion has been inconsistent. Various researchers have argued that group cohesiveness is a multi-dimensional construct, composed of task cohesion, social cohesion, and sometimes group pride (Chang & Bordia, 2001). Task cohesion describes cohesion that occurs between team members because they are attracted to the task the group is performing. Social cohesion, on the other hand, describes cohesion that occurs between team members because they like each other and share an interpersonal bond. Researchers have argued that task cohesion is not a component of group cohesiveness, but instead is a completely different construct that can be better described as group goal commitment or group motivation (Langfred, 2000; Klein & Mulvey, 1995). To complicate matters further, some researchers offer a third component to cohesion called group pride (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McClendon, 2003).

Group pride refers to the feeling of pride that members feel for belonging to their specific group or team; usually such groups are high-achieving or elite (hence the source of pride). Still other differences in the definition exist, as outlined in a review by Mudrack (1989). Sometimes cohesion is defined at the group level, such as Festinger's (1951) definition that cohesion was the total field of forces which act on members to remain in the group. Other times group cohesiveness is defined at the individual level, such as Pepitone and Kleiner's (1957) definition that group cohesiveness depicts the individual members' attraction to the group. Recent researchers have avoided the problem altogether by not offering a definition at all.

Aside from theoretical arguments, substantial empirical research has evidenced the benefit of helping behaviour in teams. Research on the group cohesiveness construct has generally found Altruism to significantly characterize the nature of the relationship between group members and group level performance. Mackenzie, Podsakoff, and Ahearne (1996) reported that altruism is positively associated with group cohesiveness in pharmaceutical sales teams, as judged by overall team sales. Using paper mill work teams, Podsakoff, Ahearne, and MacKenzie (1997) found that altruism was positively and moderately correlated with the quantity of paper produced by a work team. Furthermore, altruism was negatively and moderately correlated with the percentage of paper rejected by the quality control department. This suggests that the supportive framework and tendencies for altruism reduced the number of errors committed by mill worker teams and ultimately enhanced product quality. Only one study assessing performance and altruism has found a negative relationship. Podsakoff and Mackenzie (1994) found helping behaviour to be negatively related to performance in insurance agents, a result that the authors attributed to the individualistic nature of the insurance sales industry.

2.4 Quality circles and group cohesiveness

Konidari and Abernot (2006), and Stevenson (2007), agree that some of the potential advantages of quality circles include: increased self-confidence for both workers and staff, improved quality of product, staff are better motivated in quality circles departments, staff are more productive in quality circles departments, customers are happier at quality circles departments, saved time on operational matters, saved money, increased staff satisfaction, increased empowerment, reduced the number of errors in the department, improved the work environment, increased the work accountability, improved organizational climate, improved the work integrity, improved the management style, enhanced collaboration, increased trust between individuals and improved staff awareness of organizational goals, meeting customer expectations and increased workers satisfaction.

Review of the literature reveals that the successful implementation of quality circle programs requires commitment and support from the top-level management, commitment and support from middle and first-line managers, circles members training involvement and support of employees, circles leaders training, and organizational stability (Goh, 2000; Stevenson, 2007). Although advantages of quality circles implementation are inspiring, nonetheless, possibly negative repercussions may occur. Studies also indicate that quality circles offer environment which can be considered as conducive and favourable for trust-building and improved collaboration between staff. This suggests that quality circles offer substantial structures that serve the interest and wellbeing of the relationship within the workplace. Various writers (Canel & Kadipasaoglu, 2002, Konidari & Abernot, 2006, Slack et al, 2006) have claimed that one of the major reasons groups within the organization are often considered as being at par with themselves, is based on the lack of frameworks and platforms which can be described as integrative and harmonizing of their actions and activities.

Chaudhary and Yadav's (2012) study focused on the impact of quality circle on the relationship between the employee and the organization. According to them, the employee's attitude towards other groups and towards the organization as a whole is premised on their level of inclusion and recognition within the system. The results and findings showed that quality circles resulted in drastic reduction in wastage, considerable increase in average saving, minimizing financial losses, and increased employee's motivation and collaboration. The study also found that quality circles aided in individual as well as group development by bringing out hidden capabilities of the employees, their change in attitude, skill development and good team relationship. The study also found that significance and perception of training with good leadership qualities are the biggest cause of success of quality circle in any organization. This study also revealed that positive attitude was developed, leading to overall improvement in organizational culture as well as performance of employees.

Park (1991) also demonstrated that quality circle programs are effective management interventions in increasing organisational harmony and empowering employees, in both public and private organisations. Organisational harmony represents a desirable attribute in organization and is conceived as the degree to which organization realizes its goals. It is the ability of the organization to align groups values and interests in a manner that is healthy and considerate of all parties involved. Thus, organisational harmony also reflects the organization's capacity for group cohesiveness and positive relations. Similarly, Richard et al (2009) in their study notes that intra-organizational group cohesiveness captures organizational performance plus the excess of internal performance outcomes normally associated with more efficient or effective operations and other external measures that relate to considerations that are broader than those simply associated with economic valuation.

Quality circles can be considered as driving cohesion through its integration of individuals from different groups within the organization (Richard et al, 2009). In this way quality circles can be described as offering a platform upon which members from different groups within the organization are able to identify, interact and cooperate on particular projects or in assisting their organization. Quality circles as Richard et al (2009), observed are based on drawing from the expertise and skills of competent staff towards solving specific organizational problems – this is as members of the circle are drawn from different groups and thereby drives an integration of groups based on their links to the quality circle. As quality circles influence organisational harmony, they also affect the level of cohesion and interaction between groups within the workplace (Chinen & Enomoto, 2004). This is, in part, due to the vast number of works that have found some specific relationships between quality circles and employee attitudes and behaviours towards out-group members in the workplace (Angle and Perry, 1981). Furthermore, Batemen and Strasser (1984) state that the reasons for studying and understanding quality circles are related to (a) employee behaviours and performance effectiveness, (b) attitudinal, affective, and cognitive constructs such as job satisfaction, (c) characteristics of the employee's job and role, such as responsibility (d) personal characteristics of the employee such as age, job tenure(e) in-group and out-group behaviour, and (f) the relevance and usefulness of skills to prevailing problems and organizational challenges.

3. CONCLUSION

The premise reached in this paper is that quality circles are vital for a variety of reasons to the organization. Not only do they serve in harnessing and channelling the competencies and capabilities of the organization towards particular problems and issues; they also help to bridge the differences between individuals within the workplace and as such are important in enhancing intra-organizational group cohesiveness. This position is reached based on the congruence of views which identify quality circles are a key feature and practice within the organization which necessitates not only effective answers and solutions to persistent issues and problems, but also units and enhances the trust between various individuals and groups within the organization. In conclusion, this paper affirms that quality circles are useful in addressing both operational and diversity challenges of the organization.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the conclusions reached in this study, the following recommendations are put forward:

- i. The design and structuring of such circles should be premised on policies and control frameworks which drive the collaborative processes and interaction between members of the circle in a way that enhances their levels of correspondence and dependence on each other. This way, members will be wholly integrated and will in the same manner be more trusting and accommodating of others, thus enhancing the level of cohesion that exists between groups within the organization.
- ii. The formats of such circles should also allow for interactive sessions that pool in every member at particular times and which emphasizes on the participation and involvement of all members in a way that allows and encourages for social interactions and exchanges between members of the circle.
- iii. Organizations should also endeavour to ensure that selection or inclusion in quality circles takes cognizance or is considerate of the various diversity paradigms which are prevailing within the context of the workplace or organization.

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