

FORUM

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Krisis Hutang : Satu Pengajaran kepada
Pentadbiran Awam Masa Kini
Norhayati Mohd Salleh

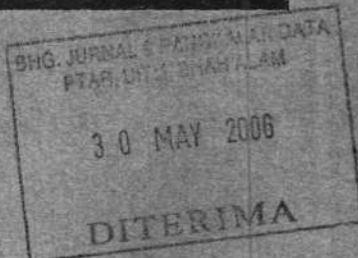
Defisit Imbangan Pembayaran dan
Beberapa Implikasi Polisi
Arifin Md. Salleh

Ciri dan Fungsi Bandar Dari Prespektif Islam
Hassan Baharom

Memahami Kepentingan Asas Nilai Murni
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Towards Improving Team Building in Organizations
Vijaya Letchimi S. Thayan

INSTITUT TEKNOLOGI MARA
MELAKA



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Towards Improving Team Building in Organizations

*Vijaya Letchimi S. Thayan**

A standing joke about groups and teams is that stated by a marketing professor. He declared that the only group that ever gets anything done is a "committee of one".¹ Nevertheless Collins and Guetzkow(1966) point out that blanket condemnation of groups is unwarranted and unjustified. Groups are basically made up of individuals originating from diverse backgrounds with different values and beliefs. As such groups by virtue of its diverse nature can provide valuable input in terms of ideas in improving organizations. They can improve communications and increase acceptance of decisions. On the negative side however many a time the collective intelligence of groups have been much lower than the intelligence level of individual members wherein decisions made can be of a lesser quality than when decisions are made on their own. This can be attributed to the tendency to allow the decision making process to be dominated by a few individual members as well as succumbing to political and social pressure or allowing personal goals to supersede collective goals.

Generally groups operate by a set of informal group norms. Highly effective groups develop these norms at the outset i.e. about "How we do things around here". Very often these norms are carried forward into groups by individuals with different beliefs and experiences. One person may subscribe to an efficient, no nonsense way of running an organization while another may prefer to adopt a more flexible and spontaneous stance. Hence conflicts may generate if each persists that their respective set of norms be used as the basis of operation for the organization. Team building efforts can further be aggravated if members are not willing to communicate their wishes in an open and trusting atmosphere. Situation may be made worse if personal goals supersede organizational goals in decision-making or in the implementation of decisions.

I will use the example of a student organization I was involved with while pursuing a Masters degree at the Syracuse University in United States of America, to illustrate one of my experiences with teamwork. An active and vibrant organization, this organization has organized several activities of great significance which includes cultural shows and activities in conjunction with the festive seasons, movie-nights, lectures by prominent speakers and organized activities to celebrate birthdays of prominent political

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¹ Bolman, Lee and Deal, Terrence *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and leadership* Jossey Bass, San Francisco 1991

personalities and community leaders as well as to commemorate the anniversaries of historical events.

The group too was blessed with a rich set of resources in terms of funds from supervising student bodies, an office as well as consistent support from the student community and university authorities. But most important of all the organization was led by a team of very exuberant leaders. Originating from diverse backgrounds, they had a wealth of experience and ideas to share. Despite having different views, they were able to develop a shared vision in seeing the achievement of the organization's goals as well as possessing a genuine sense of caring that transcends professional boundaries. All in all it was a wonderful experience until a major crisis occurred causing a split within the organization. What factors threatened to break up a group that was riding high? A self-evaluation highlights several factors. One problem was in allowing personal goals and issues to transcend organizational goals and dominate the group agenda. This was particularly so in the face of a major crisis faced by a member of the group. Though group members were empathetic to the dilemma faced by the member, there was lack of clarity and communication pertaining to the crisis. Without an open atmosphere coupled with a serious lack of communication between members, the understanding so necessary to establish a bond between members failed to be established. This led to a serious misunderstanding of each other's motives resulting in bitterness and a communication breakdown between members. Other factors served as further barriers to team building. Though members possessed a shared vision, time and academic constraints did not permit a thorough understanding and acceptance of the goals of the organization. In fact members were still relatively unfamiliar with each other's backgrounds. The organizational climate was generally formal with members seeing each other only during meetings and activities creating role ambiguity. Hence a strong bond of communication and understanding that had the ability to withstand crises failed to be established.

Given this scenario, several team building efforts can be utilize to rejuvenate the group. Robert E. Quinn² advocates use of several formal an informal strategies. Informal strategies may be favored by certain groups as it promotes interaction and operates in a flexible, tension-free atmosphere. Nevertheless it may be effective only if the group had a long established track record of team functioning that would provide a strong base of understanding for cooperation or co-optation to take place. However this being absent in the above mentioned group, coupled with the highly turbulent atmosphere it found itself in pursuant to the crisis, it may be necessary to employ formal team building approaches.

I would utilize the Human Resource frame as the key issues that need to be dealt with are humanistic in nature namely issues of team spirit, understanding, participative decision making, openness and interpersonal communication. The approach to be

² Quinn, Robert E.; Faerman, Sue R.; Thompson, Michael P.; MacGrath, Michael.; *Becoming a Master Manager A Competency based text*, John Wiley Inc. New York, 1990.

adopted should combine team building efforts with conflict management skills. The former should give emphasis to both task and process or relationship aspects. These efforts can incorporate the following. First all members should agree on the basics. This can be achieved by everyone being aware and understanding the norms of the group and developing a shared understanding and commitment as to what needs to be done. Secondly would be the search for common interests which would serve as a foundation which will seek to enhance cooperation and commitment amongst members. It will be easier for team building and conflict management efforts if areas of understanding and agreement are explored prior to working on problem areas. The next process will involve treating differences as a group responsibility that is, as something that the entire group should work on. The final step should involve leadership and decisionmaking, a process that would see the coming together of personal leadership and visions with organizational leadership and visions which takes the group back to the shared vision it always had right from the beginning.

Conflict management skills can also be utilized simultaneously with the above efforts. The style most viable given the scenario, would be a collaborative, win-win approach in keeping with the shared vision developed earlier on. Among others steps that need to be taken would involve members engaging preferably in the presence of a mediator, in efforts toward defeating the problems. Areas of agreement and disagreement need to be clarified. Attempts should be made to ensure that all information is shared and that all information is accurate. Trust levels should be high, permitting mutual influence through open reporting of facts and feelings. Search behavior is devoted to finding solutions to problems by using logical and innovative means. The final step would involve the parties arriving at high quality solutions to which all will be committed to.

To conclude employing both teambuilding efforts and conflict management efforts will most likely be able to engage members of the group in a shared understanding and commitment to goals prior to finding solutions to the problems faced by the group and thereby recreating the successful team the above mentioned group always was.

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