

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS BY USING QUALITY CIRCLES FOR MANAGEMENT GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English Communication Skills to management graduates is a challenge, teaching **large** classes is *the* biggest challenge, by large classes, 60 plus students. In an ideal world everyone would teach smaller classes so students get the attention they deserve but in some institutes it's simply just not possible. So it's the job being the ever so flexible and creative communication teachers that are to make the best of what they have got. One needs to be resourceful and adaptable to cater to the needs of the students. Often teaching mixed classes of different abilities and learning styles is the biggest challenge. One needs to find ways to activate quieter students and assess students' level. All the while one has to keep the momentum and fun in the class to keep all of the adoring students involved which is quite a juggling task. The purpose of this study is to explore the use of an alternative strategy for developing effective communication skills – Quality Circles.

KEYWORDS: Communication Skills, Management Graduates, Quality Circles, Teamwork, Interpersonal Relations

INTRODUCTION

In today's global and competitive business environment, business organizations are striving to stand out from their competitors in an attempt to garner an additional segment of clientele. Schaffer and Kelley (1993) indicated that there is increasing evidence that recent graduates of business schools do not possess the basic communication skills that are necessary to succeed in today's business world and that preparedness in management graduates is relatively lacking.

Communication skills have been defined as ability to work well with people, and involve your acceptance of others, without prejudice. Collaborative Learning is a relationship among learners that requires positive interdependence (a sense of sink or swim together), individual accountability (each of us has to contribute and learn), interpersonal skills (communication, trust, leadership, decision making, and conflict resolution), face-to-face interaction, and processing (reflecting on how well the team is functioning and how to function even better). Research suggests that collaborative learning through quality circle formation brings positive results and helps students become actively and constructively involved in content thereby enhancing their communication skills along with taking ownership of their own learning, and resolving group conflicts and improve teamwork skills.

Proponents of collaborative learning claim that the active exchange of ideas within Quality Circles not only increases interest among the students but also promotes communication skills. The primary focus of this paper is the need for using Quality Circles to develop effective communication skills in management students required within the educational setting and back on the job. This paper also explores and evaluates some of the collaborative learning strategies employed in Quality Circles to develop communication skills among management graduates.

Concept of Quality Circle

Several definitions of Quality Circles have emerged over the years. “A Quality Circle is volunteer group composed of members who meet to talk about workplace and service improvements and make presentations to their management with their ideas.” (Prasad L.M, 1998)

Gupta (2001) states that the most widely accepted definition for a Quality Circle is “a small group of people doing similar work who meet voluntarily and regularly, usually under the leadership of their supervisors, they identify and discuss their work problems”.

He believes that a quality circle will work if the following rules are applied: The members of the circle are trained in working as a team (group dynamics), problem-solving techniques, and in how to present reports; the leader of the circle is chosen by the members, a group of four to twelve people, coming from the same area, performing similar work, who voluntarily meet on a regular basis to identify, investigate, analyze, and solve their own work-related problems. The circle presents solutions to management and is usually involved in implementing and later monitoring them. (Fox, 1995)

From these definitions, we can see that the quality circle is a bottom-up approach for solving problems. The members are volunteers who work well together and meet regularly to find solutions to problems. They are interested in contributing to the success of their organization. Quality Circle generally recommends solutions for quality and services which may be implemented by the management. According to Jain (2001), organizations adopting Quality Circles can benefit in several ways. Some gains may be tangible while others may be intangible, but ultimately Quality Circles will lead to improved performance.

The perception of Quality Circles today is ‘Appropriateness for use’ and the tactic implemented is to avert imperfections in services rather than verification and elimination. Hence the attitudes of employees influence the quality. It encourages employee participation as well as promotes teamwork. Thus it motivates people to contribute towards organizational effectiveness through group processes.

The following could be grouped as broad intentions of a Quality Circle:

- To contribute towards the improvement and development of the organization
- To overcome the barriers that may exist within the prevailing organizational structure so as to foster an open exchange of ideas.
- To develop a positive attitude and feel a sense of involvement in the decision making processes of the services offered.
- To respect humanity and to build a happy work place worthwhile to work.
- To display human capabilities totally and in a long run to draw out the infinite possibilities.
- To improve the quality of products and services.
- To improve competence through effective communication skills, which is one of the goals of all organizations.

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the use of Quality Circles by management graduates and attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What type of roles did members play in Quality Circles?
- What is the nature of conflict experienced in Quality Circles and how was it resolved?
- Do students develop Communication and Presentation Skills?
- How do group members work together and develop Self-Confidence?
- Did they foster Interpersonal Relations?

Context

At the beginning of the first trimester in Business Communication class, ten (10) Quality Circles were formed from a class of sixty (60) students. Each quality circle comprised of 6 students. The students were not allowed to make their choice of quality circle. The reason was to encourage mixed ability groups. The issue of leadership was left in the hands of individual quality circle, as it is one of the skills that need to be tested in the teamwork exercise. Following quality circle formation, the students were assigned the task of identifying, examining, analyzing and solving student related problems in areas including academics, discipline, course design, lack of confidence etc. The project was two trimesters long and designed to develop collaborative learning skills, team writing, group communication, intercultural communication, team building, leadership and conflict resolution skills.

The students were provided with guided topics to choose from; but they had the choice of working on topics suggested by members of their quality circle. The course instructor who was more of a facilitator needed to approve such topics before the commencement of the quality circle. Each quality circle met the course instructor from time to time for guidance as it carried out the task. The students were instructed on the preparation, practice, and performance review stages of the collaborative process involved. In addition, each quality circle was asked to build a portfolio in which they could account for membership roles, communication patterns, tasks assignment, leadership roles, conflict in their group and how it was resolved.

Each quality circle submitted a written project report, containing a portfolio detailing their timetable for meetings, members' assignments, conflicts that occurred during the process, and how they were resolved. Students also made an oral presentation of the report. The aim of the quality circle was to teach students about the importance of developing effective communication skills which they need to perform well during collaborative assignments in the work place. The quality circle assignment seemed to be a perfect choice for collaborative work because of its extra length and complexity; the written and oral report enabled several students to learn important lessons both about effective communication skills and about teamwork.

This observation is in line with the fact that teams have become the fundamental unit of organizational structure because of their flexibility (Beersma et al., 2003). In addition, teams make better decisions more than individual team members and team decision-making is a vehicle for increasing participation, perceptions of fairness, and acceptance of decision outcomes.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study drew on data from observations, semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative strategies (drawing on suggestions in Punch, 1998, Hopkins, 2002 and Munn & Drever, 2004). For the observations, the students were first trained in how to organize Quality Circles (Jain, 2001). During the Quality Circles sessions themselves, the course instructors acted as the facilitators who can provide advice, mobilize resources to help the circle and co-ordinate the activities of existing circles. Data was collected using field notes to describe what was happening during the Quality Circles. The data from the field notes were particularly relevant to the first two research questions listed above. Ten Quality Circles carried out over a period of two months, during which the Quality Circles were observed working together to identify a major problem and find a suitable solution.

The study used quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry. Data was collected from the students' portfolio which shows minutes of their meetings and individual's participation, as well as how conflicts were resolved. This was followed by an interview of selected representatives of each of the ten groups, comprising the chairperson, secretary, and leader.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In analyzing the data, the Quality Circles were labeled as I,II,III,IV,V,VI,VII,VIII,IX&X for ease of reference. The following findings were derived from a summary of the 10 Quality Circles. The research questions stated earlier were taken into consideration. The focus was on the five central questions that seek to address the main problem that motivated this research. For ease of reference, the questions are re-stated as follows:

- What type of roles did members play in Quality Circles?
- What is the nature of conflict experienced in Quality Circles and how was it resolved?
- Do students develop Communication and Presentation Skills?
- How do group members work together and develop Self-Confidence?
- Did they foster Interpersonal Relations?

The interview questions were open in order to encourage longer and more detailed responses. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed in full. The transcripts were analyzed closely and key themes were identified and categorized under headings relevant to the research questions of the study.

Individual Roles

All the ten Quality Circles summarized the type of roles individual played throughout the period of the project. A committee made up of the following officers: secretary, chairperson, and leader formed. All members were involved in the choice of issue. Each member was requested to suggest an issue and provide justification for the same. The issue which the quality circle felt needed immediate attention was chosen.

The secretary was charged with the responsibility of taking minutes of the quality circle meetings while the leader was mandated to summarize the decisions made during meetings. The chairperson took charge of chairing and overseeing the smooth running of the quality circle meetings. Members reviewed the drafts stage by stage till the final version. The members jointly rehearsed and criticized oral presentation of the issue before it was presented to the class.

There was evidence of productive team work from the observations too. It was clear that all the students participated cooperatively in the analysis and discussion of their problems. They were constantly sharing ideas and experiences with each other.

Quality Circles I and IV indicated that during —the sharing phase, members voluntarily shared their feelings, ideas, and insights concerning the topic. Each person was given an uninterrupted turn while everyone else listened. Only after all members have shared did the leader open up to the give and take of general discussion. The two Quality Circles pointed out that—this was particularly helpful when the group had been working on a problem statement. The results indicate that right from the beginning, all members of the ten Quality Circles formed demonstrated the spirit of democracy. Despite the diversity, members of the Quality Circles unanimously appointed the key officers to coordinate, manage the activities of the group. Members of all the Quality Circles participated fully in the assignment of tasks such as choice of issue, data collection and analysis, writing the report and finalizing the report. The implication of the roles played by individual members of the Quality Circles was that such skills could be transferred to real class situation where students were allocated into groups and assigned activities. It facilitated independent learning and effective communication. There was evidence of productive team work from the observations too. It was clear that all the students participated cooperatively in the analysis and discussion of their problems. They were constantly sharing ideas and experiences with each other.

Conflict

On the nature of conflict experienced in the Quality Circle work, only a small percentage (12%) of the students did not approve of the approach. For example, members of quality circle II, III, and I who did not approve of the approach gave the following reasons:

“We are really interested in things that are done individually and later the assessment done. We only concentrate better when we work on our own. Group work sometimes is stressful; some members do not participate and are rewarded equally with the hardworking ones.”

Those that responded negatively in Quality Circles IV, V, and VII argued that: “It is a waste of time or that it could be subjective. We prefer working on our own, then any mistake that we make is our own and not everyone else’s.”

Individual work gives each person the opportunity to study at their pace. It seemed to favor some students at the expense of others.

In order to minimize the negative attitude and prejudice expressed by this group of students, the significance of collaborative work was stressed in their future careers, and in the future workplace. The students cooperated with members of their groups after explanation and persuasion.

The following summarizes the views of all the ten Quality Circles. All the Quality Circles members said-

“They were involved in defining the research problem, to brainstorm alternative solutions, or to reach a Decision through consensus; discussing and resolving a conflict in the group, or to move through successive Stages of strategic planning typical of workplace group tasks”

Communication Skills

On the advantages of the forming Quality Circles, a large number of the students (88%) were of the view that

adopting Quality Circles was highly beneficial to their academic and professional development. In an interview, Quality Circles II & III members said:

“It was an exercise preparing us for the real world of work because at one point we are going to be working in large organizations with people of diverse backgrounds to whom we have to make effective Presentations”

Others made the following comments:

“We get to understand better and discover our strengths and weaknesses and know how we can overcome the fear of presentations this made us to open up to other students and learn to effectively communicate with them”

The students also claimed that Quality Circles opened other avenues of communication like building trust; developing awareness of self and others.

In addition, they said that through Quality Circles positive interaction skills were developed; and encouraged quality presentation skills and the use of other communication skills such as intercultural communication skills.

Effective Listening

The power of effective listening has often been stressed as a very significant tool in group communication and conflict management (Cowan, 1995). In the Quality Circles analyzed in this study, students remarked that the being a part of quality circle provided them with many opportunities to talk while others actively listened. They pointed out that listening is perhaps the most powerful communication skill they developed; and through the consistent process of sharing, they developed the ability to clarify their thoughts and develop active listening skills.

A member of Group V clearly summarized this view when he said, “We were encouraged to go deeper, become more creative, find new directions, and face and solve difficult problems that may at other times be hidden obstacles to progress.”

Interpersonal Relations

Quality Circle II added that another significant benefit was that the student identified is that it promotes group interaction. For example quality circle I members explained that collaborative work brings out and affirms the positive qualities inherent in everyone of them, and allowed members to practice effective modes of communication. They further indicated that it gently forced each member of the quality circle to interact; and as they interacted, they learnt about each other and realized what it takes to relate effectively to other members. In the process, they developed positive interaction skills by observing how others feel, think, and behave and comparing these observations to our own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.

Members of Quality Circles III explained that

“We began to recognize what was effective - what works what does not. We identified what others need from us in order for the entire Quality circle to achieve its goals”

Quality Circle X stressed that

“When we engaged in self-observation and contemplation, and share our thoughts and feelings, we developed

self-awareness we came to understand ourselves by looking inward and recognizing how we Feel, think, and behave in response to other members and the issue at stake. When we listened to others do The same we expand our understanding of other members.”

Yet Quality Circle V was of the view that

“The process of the Quality Circles provided us with frequent opportunities to observe ourselves and others In action, and to begin seeing how we contribute to the success of our task in fact someone with whom we Thought we had nothing in common surprised the quality circle by exposing an underlying human Nature that leads to mutual respect”

LIMITATIONS

The study has also highlighted some factors which influenced the Quality Circles. As Dale & Plunkett (1990) suggest, the availability of time is clearly a requirement, both for Quality Circles to meet as well as for them to implement the actions they agree to take. In this study, a number of students were unable to implement their actions due to the demands of other responsibilities at what was a very busy time of the academic year. Clearly, too, a group where individuals are committed to and interested in solving problems co-operatively is likely to be more successful in using Quality Circles than one where the individuals are less willing to participate in the process. Quality Circles seemed to be beneficial in the context studied here and the students reported very positive views about this process. In interpreting these results, though, it is important to acknowledge that the enthusiasm for Quality Circles may have influenced the views that the students participating here expressed. It is likely, for example, that more could have been said about the challenges that Quality Circles presented, yet there was not much data on such issues here. The results of this study also apply only to the Quality Circles studied here.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper suggests that Quality Circles can be very useful tool for developing effective communication skills. The students in this study found Quality Circles beneficial to them in a number of ways, particularly in involving them in decision-making, promoting good relationships among friends, encouraging team work and developing problem-solving skills. Dale & Plunkett (1990) point out that one goal of Quality Circles is to promote improved communication among students. Almost all the students in this study agreed that Quality Circles develop communication between and pave way for open communication. Four of them suggested that it builds good relationships between the members themselves as well. They felt they were able to express their thoughts freely without any constraints.

The students also believed also believed that Quality Circles enhance collaborative work. They worked together, sharing ideas and experiences cooperatively. This finding supports the view reported by Gupta (2001), who pointed out that “Quality Circles enhance the ability to work with others, i.e. inculcates a team approach to problem solving”. Supporting the views of Fox (1995), students responses here also indicated that Quality Circles can be a useful tool for solving problems. They agreed that through Quality Circles they were able to analyze selected problems and identify their main causes. This then allowed them to identify suitable solutions.

Jain (2001) suggests that Quality Circles develop creativity and innovative spirit. There was less evidence of this here and creativity was the potential benefit students felt they experienced least. One reason for this may have been time

pressure, as students needed to identify and implement solutions to their problems in a short period of time at the end of two trimesters. They may have thus opted for ideas that were practical and easy to implement rather than trying to be creative.

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