

Building a Learning Organization Through Weekly Staff Meeting

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### Defining the Organization

Greater Birmingham Ministries (GBM) is a human relations non-profit dedicated to advocating on behalf of the poor of society and is committed to the following mission: ‘Greater Birmingham Ministries strives to serve God’s purpose of justice and peace by assuaging the wounds of the community and struggling in community to realize more just systems and more faithful relationships’ (Blackerby, 2008). The organization lives out its mission in three key ministries: Direct Services, Systems Change/Economic Justice, Faith in Community and coordinating a Constitutional Reform Education Campaign. The Direct Service Ministry provides financial assistance, clothing and food to families in despair, the Economic Justice Ministry helps to organize communities in terms of fighting for their rights and the Faith in Community Ministry increases awareness about social issues being experienced by the poor and alerting faith communities on how they can make a difference. Also, GBM works to raise awareness about the inequities and discrimination of the State of Alabama 1901 Constitution, which is still referenced in the policymaking process. The Board of Trustees is the decision-making body for the organization and each Ministry has a workgroup in which board members volunteer.

As a former staff member I am familiar with the organizational structure of the GBM, I worked as the Coordinator of the Economic Justice Ministry to raise awareness about issues related to poverty, such as living wage employment opportunities and public transportation. During my experience of working at GBM, I observed the organization’s capacity to develop into a non-profit that is representative of the learning organization model. In terms of identifying characteristics of a learning organization, staff members at GBM treat each other with mutual respect and understanding. High levels of respect for each other and their work enables staff

members each other to express inquiry through asking questions about projects in other ministries. As a result of inquiry, staff members do not feel isolated in their ministries and feel confident in asking for help from other staff members and volunteers.

### Reflection

Learning Organization theory encapsulate the characteristics of a team that has learned to work well together, in which each members grow individually, members build collective knowledge and the organization is the benefactor of the learning that occurs from its members. Evaluating GBM in terms of the architecture of learning organizations enabled me to identify a starting place to intervene with activities to promote more learning in the workplace. The architecture of the learning organization is represented by a triangle with the theme of guiding ideas at the top and innovation in infrastructure on the left of the base and theory, methods and tools at the right of the base (Senge, Ross, Smith, Roberts & Kleiner, 1994). GBM is committed to uplifting the poor and tearing down injustice power structures to create more equality.

Therefore, the organization is steered by the concept of community and encourages others to employ interconnected perspectives related to justice, which can be equivalent to the primacy of the whole rationale. The theories, methods and tools in the organization being used to fulfill its aspirations are unclear. Perhaps, GBM is effective in providing staff members with training to learn about strategies, but does actively practice these tools. Therefore, the intervention plan will focus of pinpointing learning moments the organization's normal flow of operations. During my time at GBM, it quickly became obvious that the leaders of the organization value a supportive work environment that encourages staff members to explore new

roles, sustain work-life balance, and attend professional development trainings. As the analysis reveals, the area for improvement for GBM is to make better use of theories, methods and tools.

One opportunity for building collective potential at GBM is to assemble all staff members and explore alternative forms of communication. The Monday morning staff meeting at GBM is the prime time to implement this plan, because staff members are accustomed to gathering and receiving weekly updates from each ministry. Currently, the executive director prepares the meeting's agenda beforehand and the leader of each ministry reports to the group about significant events in his/her area. At times, communication only seemed to be occurring between the speaker and executive director. Generally, projects are ministry specific and do not overlap. Therefore, staff members may feel disengaged and do not realize how their work relates to other areas. The intervention program will help the members vocalize their perspective on staff meetings and challenge assumptions while revitalizing staff meetings to be a time of learning for everyone.

#### Intervention

Understanding the small staff of 12 people as a self-contained team creates an atmosphere for individuals to self-reflect and assess the structures in which staff members interact (Senge et al., 1994, p.79). The intervention is a small-scale plan to increase the potential for inquiry-based activities in the workplace through incorporating learning activities into weekly staff meetings. Furthermore, staff meetings at GBM are a part of the current culture and represent one of few times per week that the entire staff sits down together. Therefore, this is the most beneficial time to ask staff members to reflect upon on the purpose, conduction and results of staff meetings in order to promote growth of the learning organization theory.

In regard to Senge's Five Disciplines, the staff meeting intervention plan is theoretically supported by the concepts of mental model and team learning. The concept of mental model explores the mental filters by which an individual filters and disseminate information. Mental models can produce greater self-awareness and enhanced understanding of others, both in similarities and differences. The skills of reflection and inquiry are key to working in this area (Senge et al., 1994). These skills like any others may come natural for some and in others they have to be developed. The ability to analytically review a conversation or experience is the definition of reflection in the context of organizational learning. Inquiry is a state of acting upon one's curiosity by asking questions and being questioned while developing and exchanging ideas.

Recognizing the value and need of reflection and inquiry is easier when they are not present (Senge et al., 1994). The lack of reflection can often hamper the communication process as individuals listen make assumptions without clarifying intent or inquiring about behavior. The first learning exercise to be completed in the intervention plan requires staff members to become cognizant of the internal conversation, in order to become more of aware of our their mentality affect behavior and perceptions of others.

As Ross suggests (1994), The ladder of inference helps establish clarity about what an event the relationships between truth and perceptions. Completing both Staff Meeting Evaluation (Krohnert, 2001, p. 37) and Tuning In (Lynn, 2007, p. 105) exercises will help staff members begin to climb the Ladder of Inference by identifying individual thinking and making public the process of finding truth in ideas and experiences. The Ladder of Inference concept illustrates the process of epistemological development by evaluating the portal for in which events become knowledge and making sense out of observable behaviors. The prescribed intervention plan will

enable staff members to question organizational structure and revise current systems if they are inoperative.

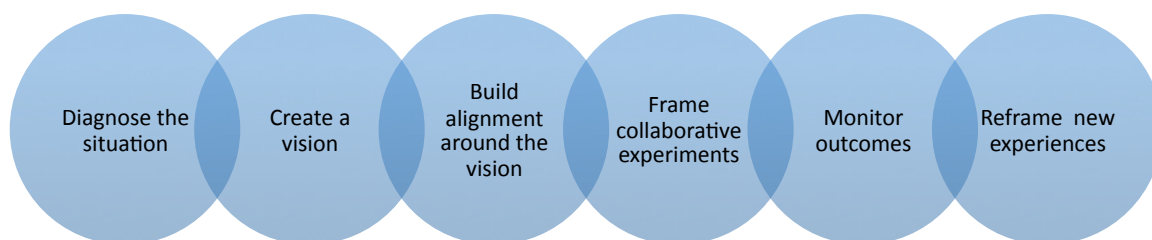
Aspects of team learning underscore the intervention plan. Teams are defined as a group of people that need each other to accomplish a task (Senge et al., 1994, p. 354). Through the discipline of team learning, the entire team ascertains knowledge to complete a task. In the case of GBM, the team is considered to be the staff and their commission is to live out the organization's mission. GBM has a small staff, yet each staff member has a vast workload, which often times prohibit cross ministry/department learning. The proposed intervention plan intentionally suggests strategies to create staff conversations on organizational issues that affect all members of the staff. For instance, staff members are encouraged to allocate time in staff meeting for dialogue on organizational challenges such as fundraising. Focusing the dialogue on general organizational issues creates staff investment and a reason for communicating (Senge et al., 1994) Although team learning literature states that ultimate effectiveness will be achieved through external facilitators (Senge et al., 1994; Marsick & Watkins, 1999), staff members will either volunteer to facilitate or rotate facilitating responsibilities due to the financial limitations of securing external assistance.

The proposed intervention is influenced by Marsick and Watkins' Change Model (1999) from their text *Facilitating Learning Organizations*. The design of the learning organization intervention is intended to enable staff members to explore new ways of interacting, thinking collectively and encouraging leadership to emerge from all areas. With this philosophy in mind, staff members will diagnose the utility of their staff meeting by completing the Staff Meeting Evaluation Survey. Staff members will create a shared vision of productive meeting through a discussion of the survey instrument. Members will be less likely to commit to the plan, if they

are not able to visualize the results and understand the benefits associated with adjusting the format of current meetings (Marsick & Watkins, 1999).

Cajoling members into participating in learning activities is not the aim of the intervention plan; on the other hand, it is intended to create opportunities for staff members to dialogue about how they can use staff members to learn more about the various ministries and their colleagues. The process of completing and sharing the Staff Meeting Evaluation Survey demonstrates mental models, team learning and knowledge sharing (KS). KS suggests that is necessary for members of an organization share their tacit understanding of events and information to help the organization sustain a competitive edge and perform more effectively (Karkouliau, S., Halawi, L., & McCarthy, R., 2008). The activity allows individuals to identify individual perceptions while transferring knowledge to the other staff members. Discussing and documenting each staff member's responses builds commitment to the process and their collective aspirations for staff members is provides benchmarks for the team to analyze their progression. The implementation of the design will be an opportunity for members to experiment collaboratively.

Figure 1.1 The Change Model (Marsick & Watkins, 1999)



Staff members at GBM can improve their communication by experimenting with more skilled conversation exercises. The exercises are to be completed after each department has been given a status update of the events in that particular ministry. These exercises are important to build each staff member's interaction with each other. They are grounded in the theory of emotional intelligence to improve the capacity of each staff member to understand the role in which emotions impact the individual and collective thinking of staff members within the organization (Lynn, 2007). After completing these exercises, staff members will be more aware of their development as a team and individual members on the team. In the past, there has not been a space for staff members to analysis communication each other to decipher the language used on conversations with each other.

The barriers to implementing this plan include the lack of perceived value among the staff. Members may assume that the plan requires too much time and energy or is too new. The trepidation involved in establishing new processes that involve self-disclosure may be the greatest threat to the intervention plan. However, once one staff member agrees to spearhead the project, others will begin to find value.

### Results

The intervention program will be successful is staff members are able to increase individual levels of self-awareness and recognize their own mental models. Secondly, if staff members are able to use dialogue and inquiry when relating to one another will determine if the intervention plan has been successful. After four months of conducting communication exercises, the staff should be able to determine if the staff meetings are helping them to learn as a



group, foster the development of new ideas and enhance relationships by completing another survey. The results of the survey will determine success or not.

### **Staff Meeting Evaluation Survey**

Directions: Each member of the organization should complete a survey about their opinion of staff meetings to understand each person's perspective for attending the meeting and how each person views the purpose of the meeting.

1. What works well in our staff meetings?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What do you learn from the staff meetings?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. How satisfied are you with your contribution at staff meetings?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. How would you describe the decision-making process at staff meetings?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. How effectively do staff members work together at staff meetings?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. How effectively does the leader manage staff meetings?

7. What are the current problems with staff meetings?

8. What can be done to improve the effectiveness of staff meetings? What rules could be devised to make staff meetings run more effectively?

(Krohnert, 2001, p. 37)

The following Chart shows a comparison of current staff meeting to the new structure, which incorporates energizing activities.

Current Structures	Revised Structure
Greeting (5 min.)	Greeting (5 min.)
Reflection given by staff member (7 min.)	Reflection & Clearing (7 min.)
Clearing- Each staff member has the (8-10 min.) opportunity to share whatever is on the person's mind or happening in his/her life	Special Recognition (2 min.)
Special Recognition-Birthdays, Anniversaries, Etc. (2 min.)	Fundraising, Announcement and Updates* (* All update should not exceed 5 min.)
Announcements (5 min.)	Financial Management and Human Resource Update
Fundraising Update* (* Updates vary from 5-10 min.)	Constitution Reform Ministry Update
Financial Management and Human Resource Update	Economic Justice Ministry Update
Constitution Reform Ministry Update	Faith In Community Update
Economic Justice Ministry Update	Direct Service Update
Faith In Community Update	Skilled Communication & Team Learning Exercise
Direct Services Update	

Ideas for Communication Exercise Include:

Tuning In, Fishbowls on specific organizational challenges, Left Hand Column (Senge et al, 1994).

## **TUNING IN**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this exercise is to help team members tune in to their thoughts and internal dialogue. Sometimes, people are unaware of their internal dialogue and, therefore, they do not recognize the power that their internal dialogue has on their actions and behaviors.

### **Why Is This Important?**

As people become aware of their internal thoughts and dialogue, they become more capable of managing their actions. True control of our behaviors requires an awareness of our internal thoughts and their influence on us, particularly because they can draw attention to preconceived thoughts we have about others and about events. Once we are aware, we can consciously decide how we wish to behave.

### **When to Use This Activity?**

This activity can be used at anytime to increase the self-awareness of staff members.

### **Set the Stage**

Explain to team members that the purpose of this exercise is to help them tune in to their internal dialogue. Internal dialogue is the mental chatter and private thoughts in our minds but that is not spoken. The process of analyzing internal thoughts can lead to greater self-awareness.

### **Materials**

A piece of paper for each team member.

### **The Activity**

1. During a regular staff meeting, give each team member a piece of paper and ask them to number it from 1-20.
2. At random points during the meeting, pause and ask the group members to tune in to their internal dialogue or private thoughts.
3. Ask group members to jot down their internal dialogue or private thoughts on the paper. (Ensure the team members that you won't ask them to share the content of their thoughts, they are private for a reason).

### **Key Questions**

In order to debrief the exercise, ask the following questions after the completion of staff meeting:

- Was it easy to tune in to your internal dialogue?
- Without sharing the actual thoughts, what trends or patterns did you see in your internal dialogue?
- As you evaluate your internal dialogue, what impact could it have had on your behavior or response to other people at the meeting?
- If you think about the people and events you encounter during the course of the day, is your internal dialogue always active?
- Why is awareness of your internal dialogue important?
- Can internal dialogue be changed?
- If so, why might you want to change it?
- How would you change it?

### **A Word of Caution**

Don't press people to share the content of their internal dialogue. The point of the exercise isn't to share the internal dialogue with others, but rather to increase awareness of the dialogue and how it could influence behavior.

### **Variation**

Ask team members to perform this activity throughout the course of their workday and week. At the next staff meeting, debrief the exercise by asking the following questions. However, broaden

the conversation by asking staff members to speak about how they may or may not have changed their behavior as a result of noticing patterns in their internal dialogue.

**Commitment**

After the culmination of the activity, ask staff members “How might you be willing to use what we discussed today in your daily work?”

(Lynn, 2007)

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