Using Real Colors to Transform Organizational Culture

Abstract

Extension educators are frequently tasked with strengthening organizations they collaborate with or provide education to. When a county government in Wisconsin experienced significant personnel changes in a span of less than 18 months, department heads contacted Extension to request professional development and team-building education for their staffs. Extension educators facilitated a series of Real Colors workshops that were attended by over 300 participants and transformed the county's organizational culture. Workshop evaluations and behavior change reported by the county administrator provided evidence of this transformation.

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Introduction

Extension personnel frequently assist groups and organizations in building their capacity to be more resilient to changing environments. Capacity building occurs when changes in the behaviors of individuals transition into a change in the collective behavior of their organization (Gruidl & Hustedde, 2003). This collective behavior becomes part of the organization's culture. Organizational change that affects organizational culture may result in emotional responses by people within the organization (Smollan & Sayers, 2009). Therefore, it is important for Extension educators to address organizational culture while building organizational capacity.

To assist an organization that is going through leadership and staffing changes, Extension educators facilitated a series of Real Colors workshops that transformed the organization's culture. This transformation was measured through evaluations and reported long-term behavior change.

Background

In less than 18 months, the government of Washington County, Wisconsin, experienced significant personnel changes in leadership and at the departmental level. As new department heads were hired, several contacted Extension to request professional development and team-building education for department staffs. These professional development goals align with the anticipated outcomes for Real Colors, an interactive workshop where participants learn skills to understand human behavior and improve their communication with others

(https://realcolors.org/). The National Curriculum and Training Institute developed the Real Colors Personality Instrument and offers fee-based facilitator certification. This user-friendly instrument identifies four personality types common across all people.

For over 15 years, University of Wisconsin–Extension (UW Extension) has used Real Colors with Extension staff during new-colleague orientations and leadership development programs. Additionally, UW Extension has provided funding for certifying Extension educators to facilitate Real Colors workshops for local organizations, including governments, nonprofits, and businesses. Although reliability and validity of the personality instrument are unknown and various similar programs exist, Extension educators selected the use of this program in Washington County on the basis of their prior experiences as Real Colors workshop participants and as certified Real Colors facilitators.

The anticipated outcomes for participants of the Washington County workshops centered on their being able to recognize their strengths and the strengths of others; build rapport quickly with clientele, colleagues, family, and friends; understand how others process information; and modify their communication style to connect more effectively with others.

Program Implementation

Two Extension educators certified as Real Colors facilitators initially designed and implemented workshops for two county departments. The new county administrator attended one of the first workshops and then encouraged all county departments to participate in the program. Early buy-in from the county administrator encouraged widespread interest by county department heads regarding participating in the program with their staffs. As a result of this support, Extension educators cofacilitated 15 Real Colors workshops over 16 months. In total, 342 county employees from 17 county departments participated in the program, representing about half of the county's total workforce.

Each 3-hr workshop included an icebreaker activity, instruction, a personality assessment, small-group activities, and large-group discussions. Workshop facilitators were intentional in creating inclusive workshops so that participants felt welcomed, appreciated, and comfortable. For the purpose of encouraging team building, workshops were offered by department so that department staff members could participate in a shared learning experience. Providing localized learning at the department level also assisted the county in promoting new initiatives and organizational change as individuals were concentrated and able to support one another (Bercovitz & Feldman, 2008).

Several workshops were held for larger departments, and smaller departments were grouped together into one workshop. Each workshop had 15 to 30 participants. At the conclusion of the workshops, Extension educators provided each department an infographic that identified the primary and secondary colors (personality assessment) for each of the department's staff members. The infographic is a postworkshop reminder of colleagues' personality traits.

Outcome Measurement

An evaluation was conducted at the end of each workshop. These evaluations resulted in 314 responses, a response rate of 92%. The evaluation questions incorporated a 5-point Likert-type agreement scale with response options ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Table 1 shows data indicating participants' self-assessed increased ability to recognize the strengths of others and increased understanding of

how others process information.

Table 1.

Participants' Levels of Agreement Regarding the Real Colors Workshop
Experience

Ability increased through participation in workshop	%
Recognize own strengths	89
Recognize strengths of others	96
Build rapport quickly with clientele, colleagues, family, and friends	77
Understand how others process information	91
Modify communication style to connect with others	84

As noted, workshop facilitators applied intentional efforts toward ensuring that participants felt welcomed, appreciated, and comfortable. This aspect of the workshop was measured through qualitative statements in evaluations, including "very personable instructors—relates well with all" and "good job in including everyone in activities."

Transforming Organizational Culture

The evaluations measured the self-assessed knowledge and skills gained by county participants. However, long-term behavior change occurs when these skills are reinforced and rewarded over time (Pratt & Bowman, 2008). Evidence of behavior change was reported in an email from the county administrator 13 months after the workshop series:

> The work that UW–Extension did with our team was extraordinarily impactful. Real Colors served as an excellent tool to integrate both our new and our long-serving teammates to help them build relationships, which are essential to their day-to-day work. Almost a year later, you frequently hear references to one another's "Colors" and how those personality traits drive our team and our interactions, recruitments, and retention. We are already beginning to discuss the next steps in Real Colors to continue to grow our team. (J. Schoemann, personal communication, December 16, 2016)

Conclusion

Extension has played a role in transforming Washington County's organizational culture through the use of Real Colors. The program increased the ability of participants to recognize their strengths and the strengths of others, increased their ability to build rapport quickly with others, increased their ability to understand how others process information, and increased their ability to modify their communication styles to connect with others. The advantages of Real Colors are that it is an easy-to-understand vehicle for introducing the concept that individual differences in personality can be viewed as strengths and the importance of how differing personality strengths can positively influence teams and ultimately change the culture of an organization. Early adoption by key leadership was essential for widespread participation, which resulted in organizational transformation.

References

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