AN APPRECIATIVE STANCE ON DIVERSITY AS WE MOVE INTO THE 21ST CENTURY: A TIMELINE EXERCISE TO IDENTIFY KEY EXPERIENCES IN GOOD WORK RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE PEERS

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ABSTRACT

Positive peer work relationships provide opportunities for black and white managers and professionals to accomplish their task objectives and further develop their interpersonal competencies. The cross-racial focus of positive peer work relationships concentrates on what is working well in them as a way to ultimately spread their benefits to other people within an organization. These positive peer work relationships can become learning laboratories by utilizing a timeline exercise to identify the key experiences, core competencies and best practices associated with them. The information gleaned from this exercise can enhance individual performance and organizational effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the aftereffects of the Civil Rights movement, the Women's movement and immigration, the traditionally White male workforce has become more diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender (Johnston & Packer, 1987). As a result, people have more contact opportunities (Allport, 1954) to interact with diverse peers at work (Carnevale & Stone, 1995), school (Johnson & Johnson, 1982) and in the community (Farley & Frey, 1994) to possibly develop positive peer work relationships (PPWRs). The criteria for these types of relationships are met when two employees of the same organization, one Black and the other White: 1) Have worked together on an assignment or task; 2) Are approximately the same level—not a boss or mentor; and 3) Would choose to work together again. Due to the history and associated aftermath of race relations in this country (Carnevale & Stone, 1995), there is a tendency to utilize a functionalist or problem-oriented paradigm

paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) that emphasizes the conflictual dimensions of cross-racial relationships. This is often done to the virtual exclusion of those cross-racial relationships that actually work well (Thomas, 1993).

A problem paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) assumes that there is an inherent deficit or negative challenge associated with establishing or maintaining cross-racial relationships at work, school, or in the community. According to this perspective, good cross-racial relationships rarely occur because people hesitate to spend time working to resolve the problems innate to these relationships and tend to prejudge unfamiliar others (Cose, 1993). While this perspective accurately describes some cross-racial experiences, it represents a singular approach to these types of relationships.

There is another approach that takes an appreciative stance (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) on these types of relationships. This perspective does not assume that these relationships by definition are inherently problematic. While it is possible that they can be difficult, it is also possible that they can be affirming and effective tools for accomplishing work objectives. Participants in them are not automatically assumed to be prejudiced, rather there is an assumption that people are able to look at each other as equals. Each person has gifts that complement or supplement his or her peer's talents. This paradigm assumes that good cross-racial relationships exist in growing and perhaps abundant numbers at work, school and in the community.

While examples of PPWRs exist, they are rarely the source of inquiry or learning in the organizational literature (Thomas, 1993). PPWRs offer opportunities to meet work objectives by com-

pleting project tasks or goals, while at the same time incorporating diversity by valuing the contributions of racially different peers and even perhaps building amicable relationships. When participants in PPWRs work on tasks they can: 1) Accomplish work that is directly related to fulfilling job responsibilities and achieving individual and organizational performance; and 2) Develop competencies that support communication, cooperation and a friendly rapport.

There is an opportunity to address the paucity of this research by using an appreciative perspective to define a benchmark of PPWRs. This benchmark identifies: 1) Key experiences that occur in life of the relationship, 2) Task and interpersonal competencies the participants use, and 3) Organizational programs or practices that contribute to these relationships. A timeline exercise provides a concrete method to create this appreciative benchmark and learn about the specific benefits of these types of relationships. Later in this paper, the author presents an extensive discussion of how to use the timeline exercise. The next section of this paper covers key theories that support PPWRs.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND PPWR FRAMEWORK

Up to this point, there has been little focus on PPWRs in the organizational literature, specifically as these relationships occur between cross-racial participants. As organizations continue to downsize and flatten their structures (Janov, 1994), peer level relationships become increasingly important to understand and grow to support the effectiveness of the organization. The PPWR timeline exercise has the potential to address this chasm in the literature by identifying individual and organizational benefits gained by their participation. Key concepts that support the framework of PPWRs are: 1) Appreciative inquiry, 2) Developmental relationships, 3) Superordinate goal theory, 4) Contact hypothesis and 5) Similarity-attraction hypothesis. In order to understand the fundamental concepts behind

the timeline exercise, each of the above five will be defined and described.

The goal of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) is to create organizations, groups and individuals in their own best images based on peak experiences of the past, as well as anticipatory images of the future. It is based on the assumption that organizations, groups or individuals can enhance their current capacity by evoking and studying what works well or success stories. They can also build on and expand these positive events by creating an inviting and challenging vision of the future that engages the hearts and minds of those involved. In addition, they can establish forums that empower multiple levels of people to use systemic approaches to construct new processes, systems and/or policies that support this vision.

This approach is an alternative or complement to the functionalist research tradition of correcting errors, minimizing defects or solving problems (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). A scientific approach to enhance peer work relationships usually focuses on fixing bad relationships by unearthing the obstacles and taking corrective action. Whereas, an appreciative approach to PPWRs assumes that organizations, groups or individuals can enhance these types of relationships based on past success and a driving image of the future. PPWRs are predicated on the beliefs that: 1) Past success stories exist of cross-racial relationships; and 2) Organizations can proliferate these relationships by making a commitment to expand practices that maintain them. The author's proposed timeline exercise focuses on what is working well. This focus is a direct contribution from appreciative inquiry.

Much like literature on appreciative inquiry, literature on developmental relationships also provides key insights for participants in PPWRs. Although developmental relationships can occur within and across organizational levels, most existing literature describes them as hierarchical (Kram, 1988; Ragins, 1997). One person serves as a sponsor or mentor, and the other acts as a

protégé. In a mentor relationship, protégés can receive career enhancing opportunities, as well as emotional support. Mentors can receive an opportunity to: 1) Expand their interpersonal skills by developing protégés; 2) Leave a personal legacy through molding protégés in their own image; and 3) Forge a relationship with a potential future ally (Kram, 1988; Ragins, 1997).

There has been research on cross-racial mentor relationships that might provide insight on PPWRs. Thomas (1993) studied the impact of racial attitudes in cross-racial mentor or sponsor relationships. His findings suggested that the task or career aspects and interpersonal or psychosocial aspects of these relationships were highest when both people shared a similar perspective on how to deal with racial issues. It did not matter if this shared perspective was to: 1) Directly discuss or 2) Censure conversations surrounding race. However, when the perspectives were not the same, the interpersonal dimension of these cross-racial mentoring relationships dramatically decreased. As Thomas (1993) did not conduct his research in the context of peers, it remains uncertain if his findings would also apply to peer level cross-racial relationships. The author of this paper suggests the use of a PPWR timeline to discover more about cross-racial relationships at the peer level.

Far less frequently, there is an emphasis on developmental relationships at the horizontal or peer level (Kram, 1988; Kram & Isabella, 1985). In contrast to mentoring, peer developmental relationships offer greater opportunity for mutuality because participants are approximately the same level. Peers can exchange information, feedback, friendship and provide emotional support, but can not provide promotions, visibility, etc. (Kram, 1988; Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Kram and Isabella (1985) did an exploratory qualitative study with White participants on the quality of developmental peer relationships. They found that desirable peer relationships ranged along a continuum from information peer relationships to special peer relationships. The former had a predominant task orientation and the latter had both a task and interpersonal focus to a significant degree. The most popular type or frequently occurring peer relationships were information peers and the most intense were special peers. As Kram and Isabella's (1985) participants were White, they did not examine the impact of the peer's race on their findings. The author of this paper provides an opportunity to examine how their findings might specifically present themselves in cross-racial pairs.

Much like literature on appreciative inquiry and developmental relationships, the field of social psychology also offers a potpourri of concepts to explain factors that can contribute to building peer work relationships across race. The similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne, 1971), superordinate goal theory (Sherif, 1958) and contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Cook, 1978) offer possibilities that influence the framework of PPWRs.

The similarity-attraction hypothesis states that people, groups or organizations are more likely to be comfortable forming relationships with people whom they believe share attitudes, beliefs or values most like their own (Byrne, 1971). This hypothesis influences the current study in that the cross-racial pairings include two people, who have worked together on a task and would choose to work together again. Based on this, it is possible that the choice to work together again comes from perceived similarity in work style, personality or some other factor. The PPWR timeline exercise the author proposes can provide insight on what impact similarity plays in maintaining these types of relationships and how people manage their differences.

A second concept from social psychology involves the role of superordinate goals. These are those "goals, which are compelling and highly appealing to members of two or more groups in

conflict, but which can not be attained by the resources and energies of the groups separately" (Sherif, 1958, p. 349). They provide an opportunity to improve relationships or desired outcomes. Sherif (1958) suggests that disseminating information, increasing social contact and holding leadership conferences can be effective methods of improving interpersonal or intergroup interactions, if they are coupled with superordinate goals. Even though the Sherif study was published forty years ago, it is interesting that many current diversity approaches use one or some combination of these methods in their training (Loden, 1996) without the integration of ongoing and/or relevant superordinate goals.

Past and current tasks that the participants have worked together on serve as superordinate goals. In other words, tasks or superordinate goals are the raison detre that these relationships have a possibility to develop into good task and/or interpersonal work relationships. As Sherif (1958) notes, increased contact, information about racial groups and awareness of racial leadership from an activity, such as a diversity class, can help contribute to positive outcomes. At the same time, it is important to note that the fundamental leverage point to develop better relationships is a shared task or goal. The PPWR timeline exercise asks participants to think of key experiences in the workplace as they relate to task and interpersonal dynamics associated with work projects or goals. As such, PPWRs directly apply the concepts Sherif suggests.
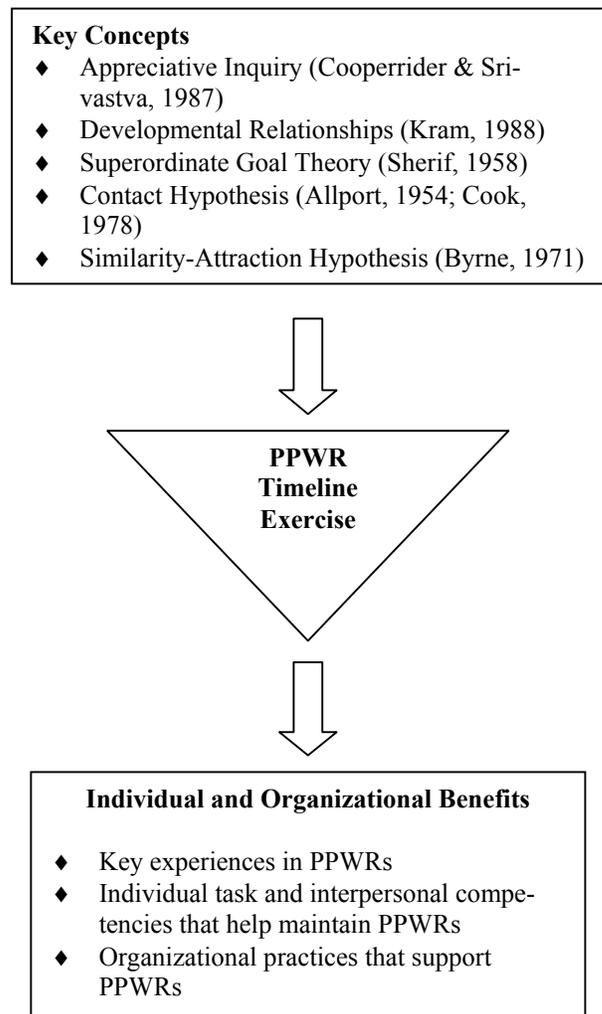
The last social psychology concept to discuss is the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954). It is a group level hypothesis that suggests that ignorance or limited interactions with those who are different creates conflict or negative perceptions of others. Therefore, raising awareness and/or increasing the frequency of interactions with those who are different eliminates conflict and helps build relationships. Cook (1978) goes on to suggest that mere contact is not enough; it is important that the contact: 1) Plays down or reduces status hierarchies; 2) Allows for individuation; and 3) Encourages cooperation or task interdependence. The scope of this author's paper involves equal status pairs that have experience working together on a task.

Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), developmental relationships (Kram, 1988; Kram &

Isabella, 1985), similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne, 1971), superordinate goal theory (Sherif, 1958) and the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Cook, 1978) combine to create the conceptual underpinnings for the timeline exercise for PPWRs.

The PPWR framework suggests that the conceptual roots for the benefits associated with these relationships flow from the previously mentioned literature. Each theory, hypothesis or body of literature provides a sound analytical basis and a priori contributions to the PPWR timeline exercise on how to benchmark cross-racial peer relationships and identify desirable outcomes. Based on this framework, a timeline application exercise can create a context for data gathering on PPWRs.

Framework of Positive Peer Work Relationships (PPWRs)

Key Concepts
- ♦ Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987)
- ♦ Developmental Relationships (Kram, 1988)
- ♦ Superordinate Goal Theory (Sherif, 1958)
- ♦ Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Cook, 1978)
- ♦ Similarity-Attraction Hypothesis (Byrne, 1971)

PPWR Timeline Exercise

Individual and Organizational Benefits
- ♦ Key experiences in PPWRs
- ♦ Individual task and interpersonal competencies that help maintain PPWRs
- ♦ Organizational practices that support PPWRs

The timeline can be a training tool that graphically depicts the historical and current twists and turns of cross-racial peer relationships. In addition, people in these relationships can use this tool as a basis to identify individual and interpersonal strengths and exchange feedback on developmental areas.

APPLICATION OF TIMELINE EXERCISE

The exercise begins with asking participants in PPWRs to draw a horizontal line. At one end of the line, they put the date that corresponds to the beginning of the relationship. On the other end, they fill in the current date. Next, each person writes down a headline or brief description of the key experiences he or she had while working with each other and completing tasks. A person places this description at the appropriate chronological point on the timeline. Key experiences include peaks events, successes, challenges, learnings, etc. Participants discuss how they were able to create and maintain a high quality relationship through successes and challenges. These discussions can include experiences, metaphors or descriptions of competencies.

The below questions can guide the discussion of the timeline exercise:

- What made the key experiences on the timeline stand out or memorable?
- In what way, if any, did these experiences build on each other to impact the relationship?
- What were the task and interpersonal competencies each person had or developed that supported the relationship?
- What organizational practices, programs or trainings made a contribution to each person's ability to maintain this relationship?
- What were the key similarities between each person that contributed to the success or effectiveness of the relationship?
- In what ways did each person complement the other?
- How did each person manage disagreements?

- What similarities and differences were there in the events each person identified on the timeline and the responses to the above questions?
- What did each person learn or become aware of as a result of this timeline exercise?

At the conclusion of answering these questions, they will have a benchmark of the key experiences, competencies and organizational practices that supported their PPWR.

The organizational benefit of utilizing the timeline exercise is an assessment on the impact of current organizational practices or programs, such as diversity or quality, on PPWRs. In addition, it can enhance managerial or task team training by incorporating the competencies associated with PPWRs. Human Resource or Organizational Development personnel can counsel managers on these types of relationships based on an understanding of what has worked well in the past. At the same time, participants in these relationships receive: 1) Opportunities to expand their comfort level and ability to work with diverse others; and 2) Learn and teach task skills, e.g., information exchange, performance feedback, etc as well as interpersonal skills, e.g., communication, support, etc. from another peer.

If desired, the pair can move this exercise to an anticipatory level by repeating the steps to draw a timeline. This iteration of the timeline exercise depicts: 1) Desirable *future,* versus past, key experiences and 2) Competencies or experiences they want to have and actions to make them happen in a specified period of time. The experiences and competencies participants list on this anticipatory timeline can come from outcomes and discussions generated from the previous timeline. A pair might have a key learning from the previous timeline that they tend to work well under time pressure and as a result do not incorporate much creativity into their work. They can use this information to identify future creative activities in the next timeline. They might choose to work on an activity or set of steps that will allow them to brainstorm innova-

tive approaches to working on a project. This anticipatory timeline serves the

function of setting performance goals because participants think of what they want to learn, experiences they want to have and competencies they want to develop in the context of their PPWRs.

CONCLUSION

The timeline exercise makes a contribution to the organizational literature by discovering a benchmark of key experiences, competencies and/or practices of organizations and individuals in PPWRs. The appreciative perspective on these relationships provides a complementary alternative to functionalist problem based perspectives that focus on fixing problems or reducing prejudices. Much like businesses develop performance benchmarks based on optimal standards or best case scenarios, the timeline exercise for PPWRs uses a vision of past and anticipatory successes to establish a benchmark of effective cross-racial relationships.

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