

Improving Employees' Engagement and Communication: A Case Study of Professional Accounting Services (PAS) Chiangmai, Thailand

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Abstract

This research focused on engagement and the communication as most common factors that affect the people in an organization to be more productive. After a thorough analysis and consultation with the management team of PAS organization, the need for improvement for internal productivity exists. Therefore, OD interventions (ODI) were conducted to increase the level of employees' engagement and communication between the management and the employees to improve productivity. A total of 3 ODI were conducted; team building activity, group sharing session, and Whole Brain Literacy (WBL) coaching. The results of the activities were all in the positive aspect. Both qualitative and quantitative data collected showed positive outcomes especially in the area of communication understanding and internal working productivity. The engagement, communication understanding, and productivity increased by 2.74%, 10.47%, 7.86%, respectively.

Keywords: engagement, communication understanding, internal productivity, organization development interventions

Introduction

The rise of the need for more human capabilities to perform the work has doubled for the last 50 years (Martin, 2014). Based on OPIC Company's journal, a professional organization, team, and personnel improvement consulting firm, it is the time for companies to shift the view of human resource development into a new format to serve an increasing demand. That is to start thinking more of staff development that could fulfill and align with organization long term goals, and objectives rather than implanting a specific necessary skill to each employee to be competent for a task. It is time to build staff competencies so that they are more capable and be able to lead the company and to cope with internal and external changes that the company encounters in this rapid changing and high competitive economy. The employees who can understand the connection between their development and the organization goals and objectives can lead the company forward with greater success in long run.

By this fact, it means that both the employees and the companies need to adapt. The employees need to be more capable; increase their productivity to do more while the companies themselves need to understand more about their employees as well as letting

them be part of the company's future, literally letting them take part and get their hands dirty in creating a new future together with the owner or the management. In the other word, the employees need to be a significant part in an attempt to transform the company. The research of Holbeche and Matthews (2012) concluded that the interaction and understanding among the companies' personnel, the employee voice, and the support the employees receive from the company are vital elements to engage employees to be part of the company's future in which they have mutual understanding of.

This research signifies the importance of internal productivity through the improvement of engagement and communication understanding between the management and the employees in response to the changes mentioned above.

Accounting and Finance Industry

Accounting and finance professionals need to adapt and be more flexible to increase their working productivity in response to the change of business needs. The core fundamentals of increasing employee productivity is to increase internal engagement and communication understanding levels between the management and the employees as they are the most common causes of inflexibility or boundaries that limit their employee potentials as well as the organization potentials.

In order to response to the situation and remain competitive in the current turbulence and future economy, the management over the world needs to look back on their organization and start building a stronger work unit or company. A stronger company can contribute to a stronger economy in each country (Gallup, 2012).

This means that to build and utilize a smaller team to perform more concerning that most of the management surveyed by Gallup said they have no intention of bringing the number of employment back to the way it was before the recent economy crisis. The management worldwide now is focusing on employee engagement and communication understanding. These two topics are being seen as appropriate tool to response to the circumstance to build a stronger team or produce higher productivity.

Organizations are seeking ways to boost engagement. One of the most important studies, which show the importance of engagement on business level, was conducted by Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002). They connected employee engagement with outcomes, which are directly relevant to most businesses including internal productivity. Countries that can double the numbers of engaged employees in every company will be best positioned to win the lion's share of world economy (Gallup, 2012).

According to Sakovska, he claimed that the employees should be allowed to speak up, bring their respective ideas and be a part of solving organization's problem in a mean to work better (Sakovska, 2012). Engaged employees develop new knowledge, respond to

opportunities, and go the extra mile to support the company, and engage themselves in the company's future (Lockwood, 2007; Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007).

Communication is also an integral of productivity. According to Sakovska, not only clear communication can provide compelling message to engage people but also can build coalition that allows company's personnel to see and have mutual understanding of the direction and goals moving forward.

To have mutual communication understanding within the company is to have a clear information. The ability to clarify and communicate clear information is a primary function of a successful change implementation (Guy & Beaman, 2005). Communication can support the change by capturing the hearts and minds of the employees in this challenging time. As consequence, it has a direct impact on employees' morale, which ultimately affects productivity (Ray 2014). The companies across the region including Thailand therefore need to pay more attention about the communication between the company and the employees. As Leggett suggested, the companies should understand more of their employees in various aspects such as cultural different, qualifications, expectations, and etc., as it would allow more resource options.

Chiangmai as a main metropolitan area in the North of Thailand would also have resemblance trends of both the opportunities from economic growth and the competition for talents. In addition, there are many competitors in the area as Chiangmai has more than 200 accounting firms. Hence, to grab more growth opportunity and attract or retain talents, companies must increase productivity through engagement and communication understanding to cope with both the opportunities and treats in the region.

Company Profile and Situation

PAS, Professional Accounting Services was established in February, 1997 by Khun Jasmeet Khaur Kharnijor. The objective of the company was to provide the following services to the customers within the northern region of Thailand;

- 1) End –to – end accounting services
- 2) Tax consulting, and
- 3) Auditing

There was a total of 27 employees in the company including the director / owner, 1 general manager and 3 team leaders. Others were regular employees who worked under the team leaders to support and deliver the work to the customers individually or in groups.

Based on the interview with the company's owner and the manager, the aim and the highest value held since the beginning of opening this company has been the high quality of work products and to treat the customers with fair and integrity. This is

guaranteed by the awarded quality business operation company by the Business Development Department of Thailand. The company has also been treated and marked in the white category and high integrity by the Revenue department.

Nonetheless, they issued explicitly that the cooperation level given by the employees was not in a satisfactory level. They explained by giving an example that during a company meeting when they asked for the employees opinions none of them answered the questions or volunteered to give a suggestion. The management believed that should that if employees were more expressing, others would learn and the overall productivity of the company would increase.

From the primary interview with the employees, the researcher found that there were some work conflicts among the employees themselves and with the management. For example, the employees were divided into 2 groups the employees who were sitting upstairs and downstairs in the office. Therefore, there was minimum interaction and cooperation between the groups to help one another with the work and increase the overall productivity. In addition, there were some complaints regarding the misunderstanding between the employees and the management; the way the management approached and interacted with the employees had created the wrong impressions and discouraged the willingness to do the work and go the extra mile to contribute to the company. For example, the process of sending and collecting documents where the management wanted to have a proper process in place so that proper time management and security concern could be comprehended while the employees wanted quick and instant response to get whatever needed to finish the job as soon as possible.

From both round of interviews, both groups confirmed that there were no proper channels or way of communication to share or introduce ideas from the employees to the management. The employees felt that it could not be done and there were no opportunity to do so.

Also, the company has received repetitive complaints from different customers for different cases regarding the services provided by the employees of the company. Once the situation was resolved, according to the interview with the general manger, the employees did not discuss and share their lesson learned or suggestions given from the management to the other employees.

Based on the discussion with the director she confirmed that she have always emphasized and seen the importance of the team, trust, and human capability. It could be understood that the company's human capital is the required source of battery for the company. That is people are the key for organization performance. However, the organization's performance does change based on people's attitude (Tasler, 2014). This is why the focus of this research was on the 2 groups of participants within the company; the management and other employees and aimed to increase the level of engagement among the employees and have proper communication understanding between the employees and the management to subsequently see the positive impact of the internal

working productivity within the company and support the growth opportunity within the region.

Conceptual Framework

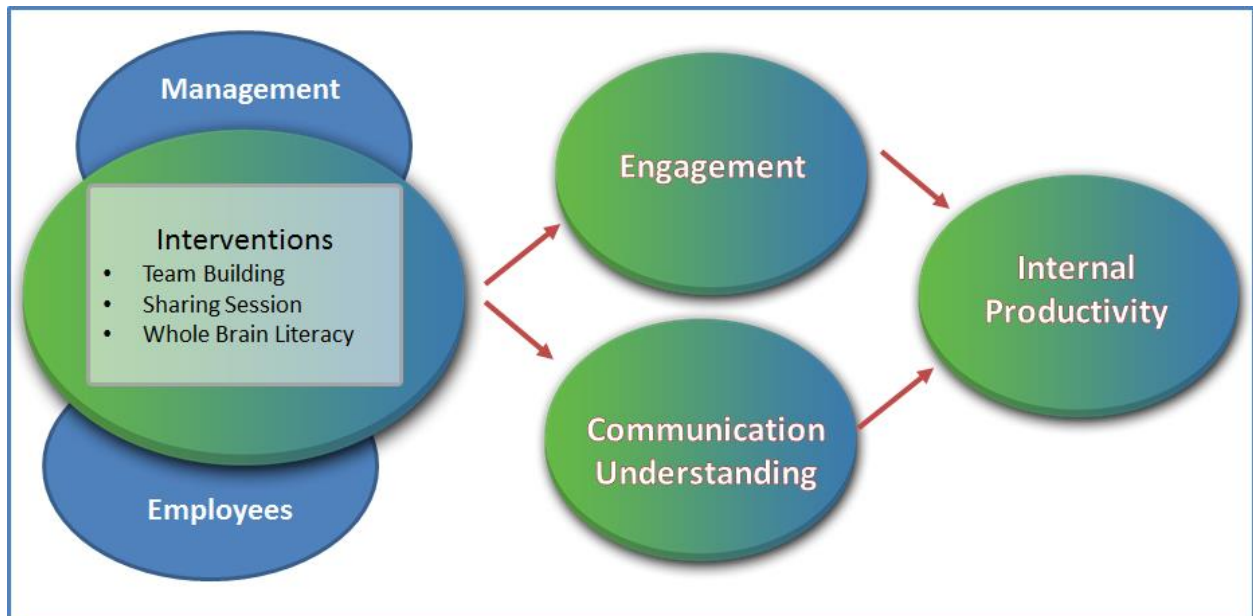


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

In order to prepare the organization for the economic growth and advance the competitive advantage of the organization, it is to improve the internal productivity of the employees through the improvement of employee engagement and communication understanding.

The management is the person who dictates not only the direction of the company but also has influence over the employees in terms of how they operate as well as the climate of the company; the willingness to work, cooperate, and contribute of the employees to the organization activities. In the other words, they are vital in terms of setting the tone of employee engagement that could result in the productivity of their subordinates. According to Thayer, he suggests that it is in the ability of the management to unleash the potential of the employees by letting them share and contribute. After all, employee engagement can make a significant difference; it can set the great organization apart from the others (Crim, Seijts, 2006).

Another point is the communication and understanding. It is clear that communication is a key factor for organization success. Miscommunication can cause discouragement for the employees to participate to their work or interact with the management. This would discourage the employees to ask questions as well as share their opinions. In addition, the lack of open communication and opportunities for the employees to communicate back to the management as well as to their colleagues means minimum interactions and chances to work together to improve productivity and grow the

businesses. Communication can be compared as a bridge between the employees and the organization that contains not only listening but also understanding (Banerji and Dayal, 2005).

As consequence, three OD interventions were conducted in order to not only establish the bridge between the management and the employees but only to let them interact, share, contribute, and collaborate together for the betterment of their working experience, that is, their internal productivity as the aim of the research.

Action Research Framework

Action research is a three-step spiral process of (1) planning which involves reconnaissance of fact-finding; (2) taking actions; and (3) fact-finding about the results of the action. (Kurt Lewin 1947). It was a journey the researcher took to diagnose the current situation; the area of focus was aggregated and the objective of the research was established. Then, appropriate actions were taken with proper evaluation to identify the impacts or the change of the current circumstances. The focus of this research were at 3 main variables; engagement, communication understanding, and internal productivity. (Figure 2)

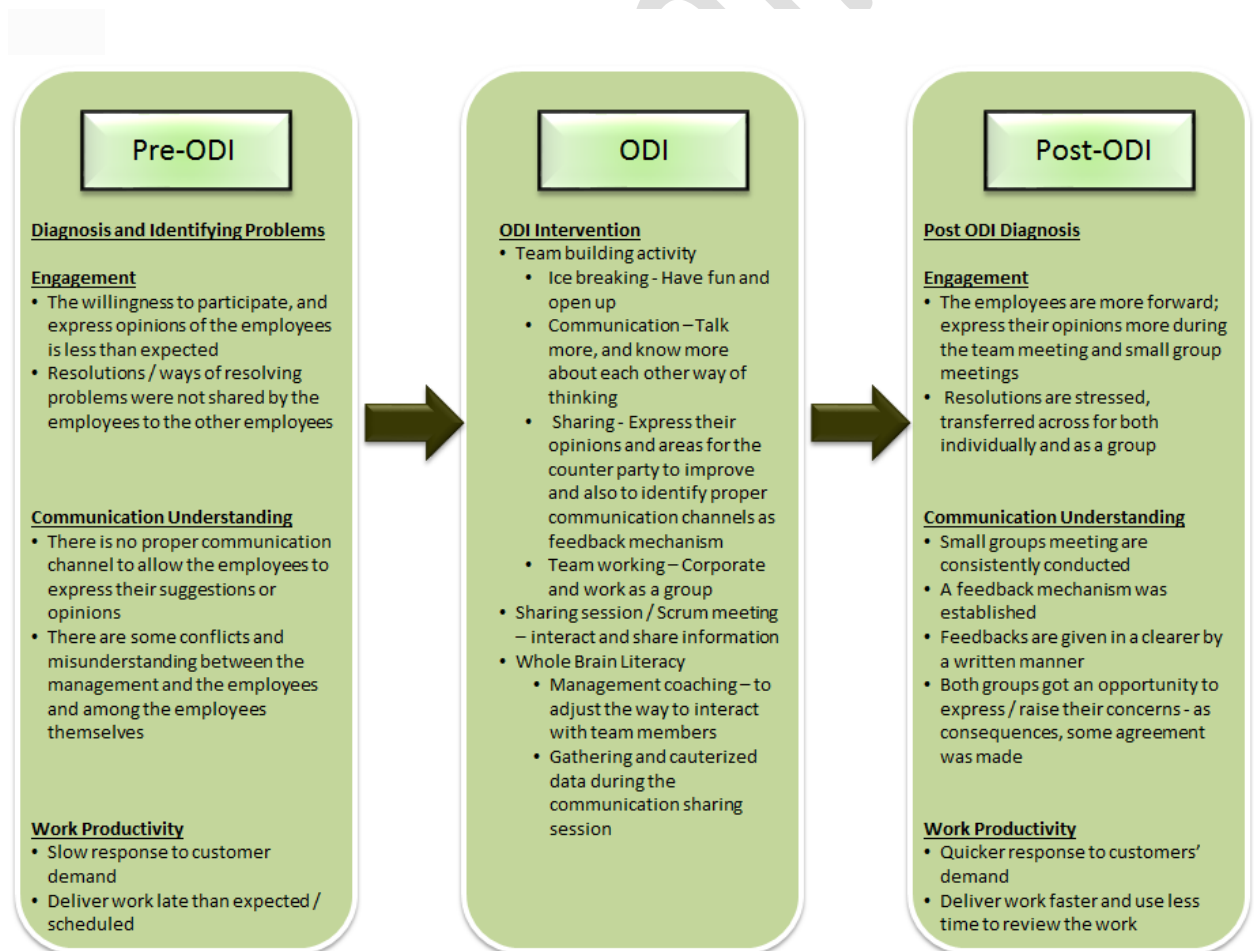


Figure 2 Action Research Framework

Pre-ODI Phase: As the diagnostic stage, the current circumstances of the company were evaluated; the information were gathered using the predefined questionnaire and interviews with all the related parties. The researcher then analyzed and formed the area of study and set the research questions. The work in this stage was concerned highly with the participants; both the management and the employees. This is because the quality of the working relationships among other things such as organization context, and process are crucial factors in conducting a successful action research (Coghlan and Bracnick, 2005). Therefore, during this phase of the research, the researcher engaged all parties since the beginning; acknowledged them of the approach, and the goals of doing the research. This is to ensure that all the participants felt that they were a part of creating a new future together.

The discovery was that the corporation and contribution level of the employees were not as expected in terms of the engagement perspective. This was documented mainly during the interview of the organization members. On the other hand, the communication flow was also not in the positive corner. The interactions between the employees to the management were limited. Moreover, from the interviews, explicit evidence was conducted regarding the miscommunication between the 2 groups. Additionally, the employees believed that there were limited opportunities to communication their taught with the management.

ODI Phase: The researcher led all of the ODI activities with the support of the manager and the management team. The activities were designed according to the data received from the Pre-ODI phase. There were 3 main activities that were put in place; namely: team building activity, group sharing session, and Whole Brain Literacy coaching.

Post ODI Phase: The impacts of the ODI interventions were evaluated against the 3 main variables. It was to validate the impacts to the level of engagement, and communication understanding as well as the positive impacts toward the internal productivity. From the entire 3 variables, there were positive impacts shown from the organization members.

Research Methodology

The research was designed to assess the current level of engagement and communication understanding between the management and the employees and to improve them in order to create positive impacts to the internal working productivity.

As outlined in the Figure 3 below, the research started by interviewing the company's owner / director and one of the company's manager to gain initial points / initial areas that need to be improved. The output of the session was also used as an initial input to frame the interview guide for the other management teams as well as the employees. Apart from the interviews, all the organization members also did a questionnaire. These findings incorporated with the SWOT analysis were summarized

and shared to the management team to properly design an OD intervention program. The objectives of the research were then discussed with the employees to raise awareness and outlay the intention and the willingness of the management to improve the internal circumstances of the company. In order to successfully implement change, leaders must communicate and involve people most affected by the change initiatives (Rick, 2014). That involved the employees since the beginning of the program and acknowledged their employees' willingness to do things differently through this initiative.

Lastly, the evaluation of the ODI were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively in order to determine the impact of internal working productivity. Quantitatively, a mean score were compared while qualitatively, another interview with the management was conducted and the data were classified using Whole Brain Literacy framework.

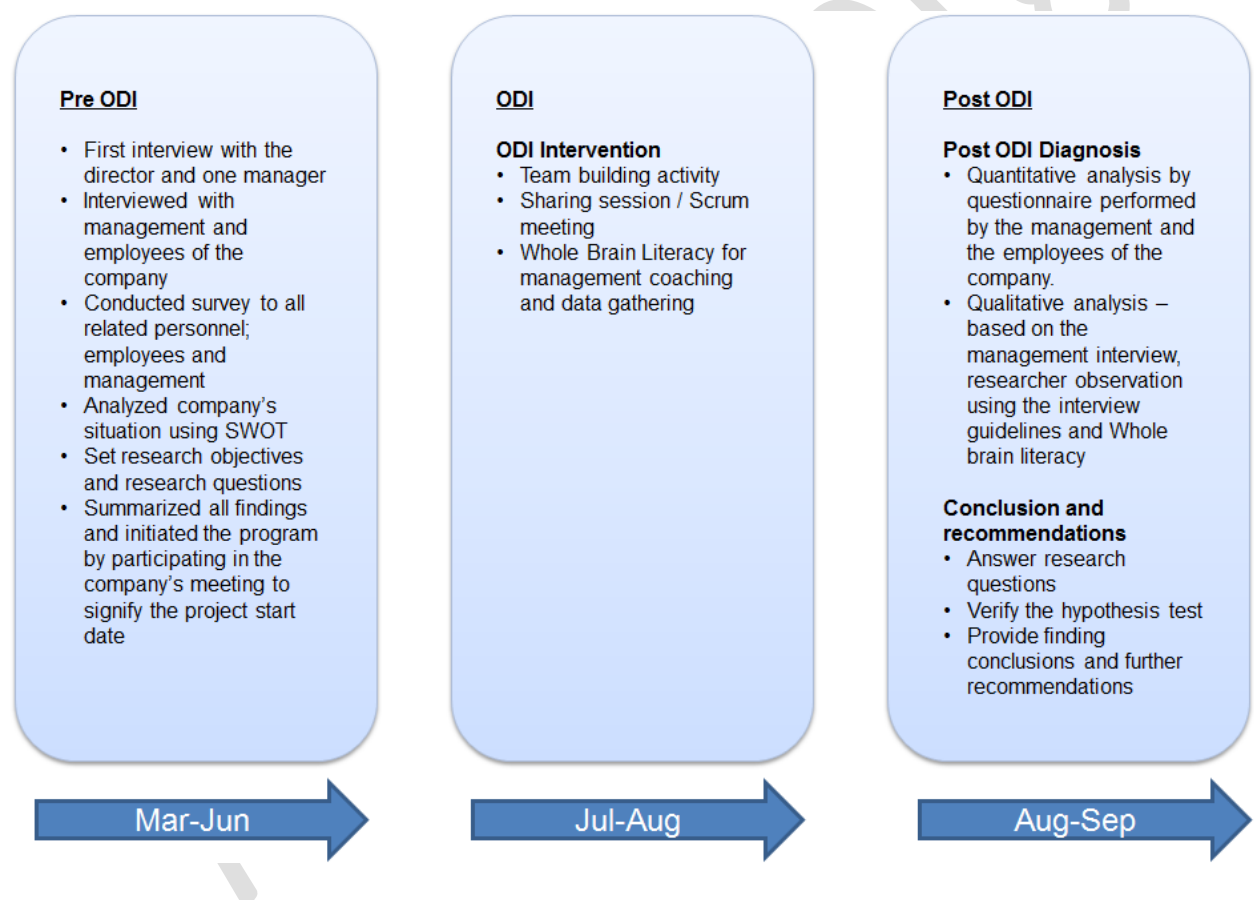


Figure 3 The Research Design

Data Gathering

During the diagnostic phase of the research with the company, the interviews and surveys were selected as the data gathering methods. The interview was selected as the primary data gathering technique as it allows the researcher to have face to face conversations with the respondents. Moreover, it presented an opportunity for the researcher to not only clarify points during the discussion but also observed the non-

verbal communication of the participants. Another advantage of the interview was that it allowed the participants to provide their opinions in order to suggest possible ways of improvement. The participants are allowed to express their beliefs, attitude, and opinions (Key, 1997). The interview was structured in the same manner for every participant in the study. The interview was specifically set for every single employee during lunch time or after 5 P.M. The time of the interviews for each personnel was around 15-30 minutes.

The survey was another channel that obtained the necessary information which allowed the participants to provide response freely without interference or feeling pressured. It was to give supportive or confirmation of what could not be said during the interview discussion. The same questionnaire was used with every participant of the study. The survey provided more comparable data than the information collected from the interview (Key, 1997).

The same techniques were used during the post ODI stage in order to verify the changes of the main variables of the study. The differences were that the interview was conducted with the management and another tool; Whole Brain Literacy (WBL) was used as classification framework. The interview was conducted with the management only due to the time constraints.

During the team building intervention, the researcher invited an independent observer to participate and provide support in collecting data for the sharing session. This was to gain a fair assessment of the employees' behavior and characteristics during the intervention as well as to allow the participants to express their feeling freely without pressure or fear.

Interview guide

The interview guide was used in a structured manner. Every employee / management was asked the same set of questions. The interview were held separately for the employees and the management.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was used to assess the current level regarding the 3 factors and the improvement of these factors after the interventions. During the data gathering process, many factors were considered in order to gain accurate and valid data that could represent the conclusion of the research. These influencing factors included the flexibility of asking questions, the willingness to participate, and response accuracy (Wikipedia, 2015). The questionnaire was selected to be used in this research in order to increase the willingness of the participants to participate and give answers that they were not comfortable during the interviews.

The ODI were implemented in 4 months. The first round interviews with all the participants was conducted using the interview guide during the month of June. The interview aimed and used the positive questions to encourage the participants to vision

the desired outcome. For example, if they complained or brought up the issue of people engagement, the interview aimed for them to tell what it should be like in the future specifically.

The distribution of the first set of questionnaires was conducted in the month of July. This questionnaire was distributed manually. A representative of the company was responsible for the distribution and collection of the data. The researcher also participated in the monthly company meeting to explain and ask for collaboration in this agenda.

A team building activity was conducted in August. The design of the activity was to incorporate the information gathered in the interviews and the questionnaires. The one-day activity aimed to increase the level of engagement, and communication understanding between the managers and the employees. The activity started with some ice breaking activity to warm the participants up, then, followed by the activities to encourage their communication and working cooperation as well as contribution to the overall group. It aimed to let everyone have their own way of interpretation when it comes to communication as well as by combining forces they can increase their internal productivity. The games included Tear the paper; Guess the word game; Memory Step; Brainstorming

During the event, the participants showed unwillingness to express their opinions and spoke out loud of the situation regarding the communication circumstances within the company. Therefore, the afternoon session was redesigned to improve the level of communication, and engagement with the following activities: a group sharing session; conducted by an observer. The participants were grouped in 2 and asked to write down what their pairs are thinking regarding the source of engagement and communication understanding barriers; trust fall; scrum meeting; and reflection.

Based on the sharing session in the team building activity, the managers learned how to conduct the same kind of sharing session in order to work with the employees while understanding each other and do things in a better manner. During the session, both groups discussed and took turns to share and express their opinions until they reached an agreement. The aims were to encourage their willingness to express the employees' opinions without pressure from the management and a place for the voices from both sides to be transferred across. The topics discussed included:

1. The employees requested that one of the management team to always stay at office. The management agreed to publish a schedule and notify the employees on a weekly basis on who will stay at office at which day.
2. The employees requested that dates for the company monthly meeting be held in a specific time so that they could plan their work as well. After a discussion and explanation of the reasons of why the current situations happened from the management, the facilitator asked that the company's monthly meeting be held in a

specific day of the month which they agreed to do so at the last Friday morning of the month.

3. The employees expressed their concerns that no one remembered her birthday since everyone receive a birthday cakes from their colleagues. The management team offered that a birthday celebration be held every month that they would sponsored for those who has birthdays within the month.
4. In terms of communication barriers, the employees expressed their concerns that they were afraid of coming to the management as they looked scary. The management got a chance to express their openness and tell the group of how they really were, and what the kind of person they were. Finally they expressed that “The employees could come to them at any time because knowing the problems before hand is better that having no clue and have to deal with the customer with no information.” In this regard the facilitator asked a “Hey Manager” box to be created so that the employees could send the request and voice their concerns and discussed further in a form of a sharing session. The result in the monthly meeting after the team building activity was that there were 9 items put in the box and all were discussed. One of the item in particular was that they were divided into 2 groups (the downstairs and upstairs people). The cause of misunderstanding were discussed agreed on a ground rule of fair and integrity with each other were agreed and to be carried forward working together.

In addition, the soft skill coaching session were conducted with the manager in order to guide for them to engagement with their employees more effectively. Coaching attempts to improve individual’s ability to meet the goals (Cummings & Worley, 2005). They learned how to read and analyze people’s thoughts and behaviors, how to interact with each group of people, and how to expand their thoughts and actions through the different sides of the brain using the principal of Whole Brain Literacy. This made them understand how their employees think and the rationale behind their thinking. It provided a way to fine tune between the management and the employees. The Whole Brain Literacy was also used as a tool for the researcher to collect the information for further analysis. It also guided them on how to proceed and continue doing the activities further to gain and increase engagement level and mutual understanding between the two groups.

Another round of questionnaire and interview with the managers was distributed to evaluate the level of impacts of OD interventions toward the level of engagement, communication understanding, and internal working productivity. The results showed that the activities were appreciated by the employees and the management. They stated that the activities was an opportunity for them to be more in touch with the employees. They could really bring the activity to use and conduct the same kind of session by their own. They said that “They could know more about what their employees think and at the same time the employees could understand the reasons of their behaviors as well.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

To assess the impact of the ODI interventions, the result from the questionnaire from both pre and post ODI interventions were calculated using the mean scores. The total mean score by each variable is as follows;

Table 1

Summary of mean score differences by variables

Variables	Mean Score Pre - ODI	Mean Score Post - ODI	Mean Score Differences	Percentage Differences
Engagement	4.11	4.21	+0.11	2.74
Communication Understanding	3.83	4.22	+0.39	10.47
Internal Work Productivity	3.96	4.27	+0.31	7.86

In summary, all variables show sign of improvement in a positive manner. As shown in the “Mean Differences” and “Percentage Differences” boxes in the Table 1, the most significant change is the communication understanding factor with more than 0.39 mean score or 10.47 percent increased while the engagement factor was slightly increased at 0.11 mean score or 2.74 percent change. These 2 factors impacted the internal work productivity by 0.31 mean score or 7.86 percent change.

The following provide detail information of the result of the questionnaire from pre and post ODI intervention.

Qualitative Analysis

In addition from the quantitative data, qualitative data also used in order to gain broader and have more support information of the result of the OD interventions. These qualitative data include 1) interview data 2) observation data and 3) Whole Brain Literacy

In terms of the engagement, the management team saw and was intrigued by the level of participation, effort the employees made during the activity which made the employees relax and enjoy. They sensed the positive energy from the employees. During the interviews, the management said that the employees were more forward about their

options during the company meeting or during a small group meeting and discussions, they had more courage and became more expressive than before. The employee team may not willing to express the problems or share their opinions at the beginning of the team building activity. They felt afraid of their management and they were unsure of the consequences should they say the real problems. This situation took a switching turn in a more positive manner during the sharing session. Brilliantly, they were encouraged and learnt from both observers to be more open and have more courage to share their information.

For the Communication, they appreciated the activity and believed that it was really useful for them to be able to communicate with their subordinates. “The thing I wanted to say was out there so that the employees could know the reason of my actions as well as I know their thoughts and feeling which I know more on what and how to adapt”. “It was a really good example of a place created for open communication and a place for the employees to freely tell what is in their minds”. Also, a Hey Manager box was created as a median for raising issues to the management. From the last monthly meeting of the company, the team conducted the sharing session themselves using the issue raised through Hey Manager box.

As a result, the internal productivity improved. They felt positive as they could agree on some principles such as the time for work reviewing process. During the interview with the management team of the company. The researcher noticed that the management characteristics were positive. They were satisfied with the results of the interventions. They said that the interventions made it easier for them to work with their employees and that they gained more valuable results. In addition, the agreements made during the sharing session including the requests were responded to and that supported internal work productivity between the management and the employees through engagement and communication understanding.

When compared with Whole Brain Literacy, at the beginning, both the management group and the employees have their own perspective and viewpoints looking at each other. Referring to the beginning of the research where the research began collecting data and found out during the interviews, there were two different viewpoints, which suggested some conflict between the management and the employees. For example, the management said that “the employees should come to them and speak up early when they encounter problems” while the employees said that “Sometimes they want to speak to the management but due to the management are not available or not in the office, that limits the opportunities to inform.” This suggested inconsistencies of the thinking between the management and the employees. Therefore, it could be considered that both groups are in the area of I-Preserve which is the origin point when this study begins.

During the course of this research, both groups learnt about each other viewpoints, they explored each other’s perspective and gathered information. Using the same example, during the discussion these perspectives were shared along with other

information such as the work quality and the reviewing process which the management complaint that “once the feedback of a particular work was given, the adjustments of the work weren’t as expected.” However, the employees argued that it was because sometimes the feedback wasn’t properly given”. This means that, through the journey of the research both group started from I-Preserve to I-Explore and I-Control.

Lastly, both groups took actions to adapt and understand and adjust their behaviors to improve the level of internal productivity which could be compared to I-Pursue. For example, after the problems were defined during the discussion session, they worked together to fine tune and agreed on certain measures, such as the management would give a specific time period to a secretary so that everyone could be informed of where the management is. Also the management team agreed to have one person to stay at the office as much as possible in order to provide guidance and support the work so that subordinates can work better. On the other hand, the employees also committed to come forward; ask more questions and write down the comments suggested for the management.

This learning journey presented an opportunity for both the employees and the management to learn and view things from different perspectives that increased their internal productivity by improving their engagement and communication level.

In summary, the feeling of the management team based on the interviews and when working together with the employees were positive in all three variables. This is consistent with the results of the quantitative data.

Conclusions

The research began by getting in touch with the company management to gather the data and find out the areas for improvement. The researcher analyzed the trend and the current situation using the SWOT analysis before proposing a set of improvement to be implemented. A discussion between the management and the researcher were conducted to conclude the area of improvement.

The researcher then participated in the monthly company meetings to get in touch with the employees, informed them of the objectives and purpose of the reason of the research, how they would get involve in the process, and explained about the plan of conducting them. This was done to initiate the program and engaged them since the beginning. It was also aimed to create a relax and positive environment.

The ODI intervention created were aimed to provide impacts in terms of the employees’ engagement and create mutual communication understanding which would in turn create more internal productivity. The research assessed the impacts of employees’ engagement, communication understanding, and internal productivity of the company.

The positive results were confirmed by the management team themselves and the observers after stated that the activities encouraged and created a positive atmosphere for

the team to share and resolve issues related to misunderstandings. They also encouraged continuous sharing and improving which would affirm the confidence of the employees to come forward once things get improved.

The results showed that a relaxed and open environment, and open communication could increase internal productivity. The employees were more than willing to share and write down what were on their minds and expressed their opinions with the hope to achieve the desired change.

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