Action Research

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Publications

Enhancing personal and corporate values to reduce toxicity in a TVET College environment: a living theory of organisational development

Abstract

As an HRD manager in a Technical Vocational Education and Training college in South Africa, I am aware that these colleges face various systemic challenges that impact negatively on employee wellbeing. I have first-hand experience of workplace toxicity that negatively affected my health and that of my fellow managers who report to the Senior Management Team at the corporate centre of my college. This situation denied my ontological values which led to cognitive dissonance which was intensified as I was responsible for wellness and organisational development. I was thus driven to embark on a values-based practitioner self-enquiry to generate a personal living theory of organisational development aimed at improving my practice and influencing other managers in the college to enable us to improve the work climate by embodying life enhancing values into our practice. This study sets out to answer my research question: How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current climate of toxicity which is experienced every day? My qualitative study is based on my paradigmatic and theoretical choices and the utilisation of appropriate methods of data generation and analysis. My theoretical choices stemmed from my epistemological, ontological and philosophical assumptions. My project was embedded in an existential, phenomenological, critical, participative research paradigm using the toxic triangle model, wellness theory, dialogic organisational development theory, chaos and complexity theories and value theory. I used visual methodologies to build relationships and promote healthy catharsis before identifying possible areas for action. Further data was generated by video journals, transcripts of action learning set meetings, my own personal reflective journal, semi-structured interviews and college artefacts such as documents and policies. My research design was rooted in action research having three cycles in the project. Cycle 1 reflects my first attempt at organisational development through a diagnostic approach to enhance the college's values. Due to its failure I learned to change my thinking and practice on

organisational development and embraced dialogical organisation theory as an alternative approach to orchestrate change within an organisation. This failure led me to embrace a more cooperative and participative approach. Cycle 2 traces the selection, establishment and maintenance of an action learning set as change agents to help in data co-generation and analysis. Thematic analysis of the data generated through visual methods including the drawing of two collages and video narratives of our drawings. The following themes emerged from the data analysis namely that emotional trauma is prevalent amongst managers, that when values are violated it impacts negatively on communication, and when values are violated it leads to experiences of trauma and finally that drawing activities play a therapeutic role in dealing with trauma. The action learning set consisted of 11 members who were all mature managers and covered all gender and race groups with an average age of 47. Cycle 3 traced the action learning set's initiatives to identify the values that were negated that had created a breeding ground for toxicity to flourish due to poor communication. In this last cycle, projects, such as poster advocacy campaigns on prioritised values was under taken that conscientised employees. Using dialogic organisational development approaches such as Open Space Technology, two Critical Caring Conversation Café meetings were held at the corporate centre where a safe space was created for employees to address toxicity, victimisation and wellness and to change the conversation within the organisation. Coupled with the emphasis to change conversation in dialogical organisational development social media was used to drive home positive slogans. Assessment of the project was gained by the action learning set members participating in semi-structured interviews administered while they were grooming horses. My learning and that of the action learning set revealed that managers suffered emotional trauma due to toxic leaders, toxic followers and toxic environments. There was little support and the way mangers coped with trauma was to supress their emotions. After being involved in the action learning set over a period of two years managers had improved their coping skills by acknowledging and speaking openly and sharing their traumatic experiences with each other, taking responsibility for their own lives and practices, supporting one another and becoming more assertive. Based on the research findings, my personal learning and the learning gained by the action learning set members, I was able to produce my living theory of organisational development by developing a model of organisational development for use in my toxic organisation to nurture life enhancing values and improve personal and organisational wellness. I acknowledge that this model is relevant for my college now and may not be relevant for other colleges or relevant in some future time due to the ever changing context of colleges. However, the significance of this study lies firstly in the personal development of the action learning set members and secondly in their improved practice. I have improved my practice as an HRD manager and have influenced others to improve their practice and in so doing I have contributed to my own wellness and the wellness of others in the college. The broader significance of this research is that it may be of interest to other colleges facing the toxicity in the college sector as well as other education institutions.