MODERATION- A STRATEGIC TOOL FOR PROBLEM SOLVING AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS AND TEAMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study the need for moderation, factors affecting moderation and its contribution to organizational improvement. Organizations are made up of people working in groups and handling different roles. Employees differ in terms of ego, thinking preferences, attitude, perceptions, behavior etc. Often, these individual differences create group synergy and team excellence. More often than not, these individual differences also create extremities and polarities in the group which become difficult to resolve and challenges/ problems are not solved in the optimal manner and become time and resource consuming and become more of a blame fixing game than a problem solving exercise. Removing such extremities of thoughts, opinions, perceptions, behaviors etc and to channelize teams towards common goals requires the intervention of trained and experienced moderators. Moderation techniques, if used properly, can help teams to work on problem statements and generate effective solutions and action plans. A repeated-measures experimental design for 28 subjects revealed that moderated meetings are more effective compared to non-moderated meeting.

KEY WORDS – Moderation, Moderation techniques, Organizational Conflicts, Brain storming, Group dynamics, Communication, Prioritization, Root Cause Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Organizations are made up of people working in small and large teams/ groups, in different roles, hierarchies, functions and departments towards attainment of organizational objectives and goals.

Each person is different. Each person has his own ego, thinking preferences, attitude, perceptions, behavior etc. Often, these individual differences create group synergy and team excellence. More often than not, these individual differences also create extremities and polarities in the group which become difficult to resolve and challenges/ problems are not solved in the optimal manner and become time and resource consuming and become more of a blame fixing game than a problem solving exercise.

Removing such extremities of thoughts, opinions, perceptions, behaviors etc and to channelize teams towards common goals requires the intervention of trained and experienced moderators.

Many organizations are today recognizing the need for such internal and external moderators and are strategically focusing on developing such moderators.

Simply defined, moderation is the removal of extremities and ensuring normality.

A few examples of situations where moderation may be required for solution of problems are as follows:-

- Finished goods are facing rejection by customers
- Software developed for clients has developed bugs
- Indian and foreign colleagues are facing problems while working together

- Employees in a department are demanding flexible working hours
- Female married employees feel that having a crèche at the work place will boost productivity

The objective of this paper is to study the need for moderation, the various factors affecting the same and to study the effectiveness or otherwise of moderated meetings.

A repeated measures design was used to compare moderated meeting with a non-moderated meeting over effectiveness parameters

RESEARCH QUESTION

Through this research, the researchers have sought answer to the question of whether effectively moderated meetings within organizations and teams lead to effective problem solving and continuous improvement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Moderated meeting are more focused and generally result in accomplishment of meeting objectives. Moderator's ability to resolve conflicts arising due to difference of opinion, his art of effective communication and his ability to conduct a root cause analysis are keys to success in corporate meetings. Proper communication is a key to find the problem within the system.⁽¹⁾

(Robert D. Ramsey, 2003, highlights the importance of effective conflicts resolution strategies. He believes that Personality clashes often distract from work routines; undermine morale, jeopardize teamwork, threaten productivity and can erupt into dangerous and violent confrontations.⁽²⁾

Cultural differences can facilitate learning but can also be hindrance to smooth functioning of a meeting. RCA is imperative to prevent a meeting deviating from set objectives. RCA is a tool designed to help identify not only what and how an event occurred, but also why it happened.⁽³⁾

RCA is cognitive process. In the words of Duke Okes, 2008, *"Humans are emotional creatures, which makes them more interesting and very problematic. Individuals and groups both demonstrate emotional patterns that can support or detract from their ability to solve problems."*⁽⁴⁾

3. ROLE OF MODERATOR

Need for moderation in organizations arises

when some one feels that a particular group work will need the intervention of a trained moderator to keep discussions on track and to get desired results from the team. For the sake of identification, let us call this person as the originator.

Once such a need arises, the originator normally contacts an internal / external trained moderator to moderate the discussions and to drive results. Normally, the moderator is a neutral third party who is a specialist in the methodology of moderation. Even if, he/she has knowledge and experience about the topic of moderation, he/she does not become a part of the discussions. The moderator is an expert in the ability to channelize the group's energy towards working on desired objectives and goals.

The moderator is a good communicator, a good listener, a good visualizer and has the ability to channelize thoughts through effective asking of questions. For result oriented moderation, it is important for the originator and the moderator to meet, well in advance and to decide on the scope of the moderation. The moderator and the originator work on the important domains of moderation. They try to identify the problem statement and the reasons why moderation is needed. They check for past history and data on the subject. They also identify the stake holders, participants and beneficiaries for the moderation session. Issues such sending out invitations for the session, venue for the meeting, timings, arrangements, costs, desired outcomes, contingency plans and role of the originator during the session are also discussed and finalized

Many moderation sessions fail due to lack of clarity on the above matters and hence moderators need to take out the time and be motivated to find answers to the above questions while preparing for the moderation sessions.

Most moderation sessions involve participants from varied teams and groups, many of whom do not know each other or who are only acquainted. Moderators are experts in helping people to become more amenable to group thinking and group work. They are trained to use introduction sessions, warm up sessions, stimulating sessions, physical and mental energizers to make the participants relaxed, comfortable and willing to contribute positively during the sessions.

4. MODERATION SESSIONS

Moderation sessions typically include Start up and warm up, presentation of back ground, perspectives and

facts by the originator, Presentation of problem statements, call up questions to collect participant views on the problem statements, polarization of agreement/ disagreement to problem statements, exchange of views from both sides to make participants aware of views and counter views, brain storming of root causes using various techniques such as mind maps, Ishikawa diagrams, clustering of root causes, prioritization questions for ranking the clusters, prioritizing the tackling of the root causes, asking lead questions for leading the group towards thinking of solutions, converting the solutions into tangible action plans and action steps, fixing of responsibility for planned action steps, identifying open list of topics to be taken up separately and other list of recommendations which may have arisen during the course of moderation, getting feed back from the participants and presenting action plans to the originator

During the moderation session, the moderator has to ensure that all the participants are treated with respect and trust and basic human dignity is maintained during all times. The moderator also ensures that problems/ resistance within the group are solved amicably, Confidentiality of opinions and views are maintained through secret voting, ballots, and shuffled written opinions etc wherever needed.

Moderation involves individual and group communication. Communication needs to be kept centered around the topic of moderation as many times, groups tend to intentionally or otherwise, digress from the topic. Moderators have to hence, have the ability to keep the group channelized through proper communication strategies. Having a probing approach and asking the right questions helps effective moderation.

If the moderator uses the wrong technique of questioning, he may actually put off the participants and make them clam up instead of participate. Moderators are also good listeners. They listen to participants carefully. They help in bringing out problems, views, concerns, opinions, solutions from the group. They listen with a view to understand and not with a view to reply. Moderators also have a winning style of communication. While using the right words to present facts objectively, moderators also ensure that the spoken and unspoken words also create positive and healthy relationships and lead to desired actions towards predetermined goals.

Despite the best efforts, some times moderation sessions face problems and bottle necks. Such problems could arise due to role conflicts, wrong participants, ego clashes, trouble makers, discussions going out of context

etc. It is the job of the moderator to foresee such problems/ resistance and solve the problems effectively.

Moderation is not a solution to all organizational problems. It is a specific technique used in specific circumstances to get specific results. Moderation can be effectively used in areas where small teams are facing problems for which focused brain storming is required to come to root causes and to prioritize actions and to develop concrete and time bound action plans.

5. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

To study the impact of moderated meetings or the non moderated meetings the researchers carried out a detailed experiment involving 28 individuals within a large organization in Pune city, Maharashtra, India, on two different occasions and in two different settings. The 28 participants, belonging to the same department within an organization and having very demographic variations of gender, hierarchy, designation and experience were grouped together for meeting on a sensitive issue which could have a bearing on their working hours and holidays. This meeting was completely non-moderated. A week later the same group was exposed to an environment wherein, the meeting was scientifically designed and conducted using the various moderation techniques. The researchers obtained the feedback on both occasions from the group participants on a 5-point Likert scale on 13 parameters to measure the perception of the participants under both circumstances.

5.1 STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

A Wilcoxon Matched pairs signed ranks test was conducted (since test of normality was violated) to compare the effect of moderated training with an un-moderated training with reference to 13 parameters: time management, deviation from agenda, mutual dignity, mutual trust, solutions and conclusion, participation of members, effective brain storming, healthy and productive environment, prioritization of ideas, effective dealing with trouble makers, effectively dealing of resistance, effective dealing of disagreement, right fit of participants. Data so collected was analyzed using IBM SPSS.

5.2 DATA ANALYSIS RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most respondents agreed that time management

was effective when meeting was conducted with moderator compared to without moderator; without moderator ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 0.92$) with moderator ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.81$), $z = -4.478$, $p = 0.000$. Respondents moderately agreed that meeting did not deviate from agenda when moderator was present, however for meeting without moderator they disagreed on meeting did not deviate from agenda; without moderator ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.46$) with moderator ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.19$), $z = -3.31$, $p = 0.001$. Mutual dignity was effective when meeting was conducted with moderator compared to without moderator; without moderator ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.26$) with moderator ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.86$), $z = -4.21$, $p = 0.000$. Mutual trust was also effective when meeting was conducted with moderator compared to without moderator; without moderator ($M = 2.074$, $SD = 1.05$) with moderator ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.97$), $z = -4.133$, $p = 0.000$. Respondents agreed that group members arrived at solutions and conclusion when meeting was moderated, however they disagreed on solutions and conclusions being reached when meeting was conducted without moderator; without moderator ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.17$) with moderator ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.88$), $z = -3.88$, $p = 0.000$. Participation of members was moderate when meeting was conducted without moderator and was effective when conducted with moderator; without moderator ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.26$) with moderator ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.83$), $z = -2.66$, $p = 0.008$. Brain storming was less effective for meeting without moderator compared to meeting without moderator, without moderator ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.28$) with moderator ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.90$), $z = -4.173$, $p = 0.000$. Respondents disagreed that environment was healthy and productive without moderator however they agreed that it was healthy and productive when meeting was conducted with moderator; without moderator ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.95$) with moderator ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.84$), $z = -4.263$, $p = 0.000$. Prioritisation of ideas was less notice when meeting was conducted without moderator however it was prominently noticed when meeting was conducted with moderator; without moderator ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.98$) with moderator ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.87$), $z = -4.502$, $p = 0.000$. Dealing with trouble makers was effective when moderator was present; without moderator ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.31$) with moderator ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.97$), $z = -3.662$, $p = 0.000$. Resistance was also dealt effectively when moderator was present; without moderator ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.38$) with moderator ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.92$), $z = -3.4$, $p = 0.001$. Respondents agreed that disagreements could be dealt effective because of the presence of moderator compared to when the moderator

was absent; without moderator ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.13$) with moderator ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.68$), $z = -4.292$, $p = 0.000$. Right fit of participants was seen in both meetings; ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.19$) with moderator ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.97$), $z = -2.039$, $p = 0.039$.

5.3 FINDINGS

Based on the above experiment, the researchers have drawn conclusions as follows:-

1. Time management was effective when meeting was conducted with moderator compared to without moderator.
2. Meeting did not deviate from agenda when moderator was present, however for meeting without moderator it did deviate from agenda.
3. Mutual dignity was effective when meeting was conducted with moderator compared to without moderator.
4. Mutual trust was effective when meeting was conducted with moderator compared to without moderator.
5. Solutions and conclusion were arrived at in a moderated meeting; however no solutions and conclusions could be arrived at when meeting was conducted without moderator.
6. Participation of members was noticed moderately when meeting was conducted without moderator and was prominent when conducted with moderator.
7. Brain storming was less effective for meeting without moderator compared to meeting without moderator.
8. Prioritization of ideas was less notice when meeting was conducted without moderator however it was prominently noticed when meeting was conducted with moderator.
9. Dealing with trouble makers was effective when moderator was present.
10. Resistance was also dealt effectively when moderator was present.
11. Disagreements could be dealt effective because of the presence of moderator compared to when the moderator was absent.
12. Right fit of participants was seen in both meetings

6. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, it can be seen that, moderation

techniques, if used properly, can help teams to work on problem statements and generate effective solutions and action plans. Organizations should train and develop capable individuals from within, to take on the role of moderators. Rightly used, it will be a very effective tool for continuous improvement of the organization. It should also be kept in mind that effective moderation is a skill which can be developed by individuals through practice. Effective moderators learn the techniques of moderation, apply it in real time, consolidate their experiences, transfer it to every day practice and emerge as better moderators. Organizations should train and develop capable individuals from within, to take on the role of moderators. Rightly used, it will be a very effective tool for continuous improvement of the organization.

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