

Gridiron Gang: Fostering Growth Through Transformational Leadership

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to identify organizational behaviour issues and solutions in the movie *Gridiron Gang*. The movie follows Sean Porter and his influence on the inmates in a juvenile detention center. He decides to form a football team which is used to rehabilitation inmates and prevent them from ending up back in the prison system. Our paper specifically talks about how Sean Porter took on the role of a transformational leader and created change by re-working the structure and culture of the organization, and by being a positive role model for the inmates.

Keywords: Gridiron Gang, transformational leader, Sean Porter

Facts

Facts on the Juvenile Detention Centre

The juvenile facility portrayed in the movie is similar in culture to prisons for adult offenders. In the movie, prisoners spend most of their day doing menial tasks and being idle. Prisoners are often members of gangs, and there are a lot of fights due to historical conflicts. When they misbehave, they are punished by isolation; otherwise, they do not have any privacy as they all sleep in one room together. There is a lack of psychological support from facility workers, apart from the main character Sean Porter. Through the course of the plot, he starts a football team after a resident is killed only one day after he was released from the prison. He is faced with opposition from management, however, as there is a severe lack of resources and a culture of apathy. Sean decides to purchase the equipment for his team regardless and begins a shift in culture.

Facts on the Prisoners

The prisoners come from troubled neighborhoods. Many of them are not in the juvenile facility for the first time and are repeat offenders. When the coach Sean Porter asks one of the inmates where he sees himself in four years, he responds “in jail.” Sean argues however, that the inmate is going to end up dying from his lifestyle if he does not change. The inmate gets killed following the day of his release, and Sean decides something larger must be done.

Many of the residents lack supportive relationships in their personal lives. We can see that some of them have complicated family situations even before they arrive at the prison. During visiting hours, prisoners frequently argue with and offend the relatives that have come to see them. Gang violence and a culture of retaliation make these conflicts difficult to resolve because of the history of hatred within the community.

In contrast, they get excited about the possibility of playing football and work hard to win their matches. They become disciplined and team oriented. When one of the team members gets injured, others rush to help him; this would not have happened before the formation of a team. After losing the first match, they self-motivate themselves and start practicing again.

Inferences

The inmates in the juvenile detention centre seem to be lacking self-esteem and motivation. They cannot see a positive future for themselves, and they tend to be depressed. As Sean points out, a lot of them end up in jail or dead when they leave the centre. We assume this because the facility and their community does not provide them with opportunities to improve their own lives. When they leave the centre, they become caught up in the same gang politics as before and end up reoffending.

The centre's staff view the inmates as irredeemable offenders and see the facility as a place of punishment instead of a place where the boys can grow and learn crucial life skills to create a future for themselves. There is a lack of will from management to change anything, even though they know that the program is failing to rehabilitate the residents. They are pessimistic when Sean approaches them with the idea of the football team and do not think the inmates deserve a second chance. The managers of the facility obstruct funding for the team and restrict the supply of proper equipment. We infer here that these managers are adhering to old, systemic norms and that the inmates feel isolated and resentful.

Sean is the only one who takes the initiative to change the environment. He gets emotionally attached to several prisoners and wants to help. Even though the odds are often against him, he shows everyone that he knows what he is fighting for. He understands that the inmates need a sense of a community if they are going to escape their gang background. By creating a team, Sean wants to provide them with the opportunity to grow and become better people. Additionally, we argue that by taking these steps, Sean transforms the prison's culture and the views the inmates have of themselves.

Problem

After analyzing the facts and establishing our inferences of the situation, we suggest that the primary problem in the juvenile correction centre is that it is not designed or structured in a way that supports positive change in the residents. The organization is run as a rigid, top-down institution that fails to provide the resources required to change the cycle of recidivism in the boys' lives. The organization possesses a cultural belief that the residents are beyond the hope of correction and are only there to serve time as punishment before they inevitably reoffend. This

issue is causal to various distinct subproblems, outlined below, each of which further contributes to the diminished self-esteem and motivation of the inmates, and has negative implications for the whole organization.

Support by Management

The organization's management fails to offer meaningful support to the boys throughout the film and even acts to retract funding in some cases. Based on our inferences, management does not recognize the need to offer financial and psychological support for several reasons. For one, the prevailing attitude of indifference towards resident rehabilitation is a clear influence in managerial decision making. It has been found that prison workers often establish a sense of indifference towards the plight of institutionalized individuals in a subconscious effort to maintain a dignified sense of self amidst the difficult, or "dirty," aspects of their job (Lemmergaard & Muhr, 2012). We inferred that the managers in this film are experiencing this effect based on their disapproval of Sean's plan to ameliorate the lives of the boys. They act as though his efforts to reduce recidivism in the centre are futile and a waste of time. Management also cites a lack of adequate funding when explaining their resistance to Sean's plan of improving the residents' self-esteem. Johnsen et al. (2011) said, "At a time when efficiency and cost-effectiveness governs crime policy, it is easy to accord a lower priority to the quality of prison life". This counter-intuitive rationale is directly applicable to this case. In an organization whose purpose is to assist young men in bettering their lives, crucial support is knowingly withdrawn in the interest of financial budgets.

Leadership in the Organization

In our inferences, we established that the residents do not possess the motivation to improve their situation or seek lasting change. This can in part be attributed to the

leadership figures of the organization, or lack thereof. The beginning of the film is where this problem is most evident. At this stage, the upper-level management has employed a laissez-faire leadership style, due to the indifference previously described. This style of leadership is indicative of both apathy and cynicism and can lead to frustration amongst followers, or in this case the residents (Sarros, 2001). At this point in the plot, Sean attempts to motivate the boys through punishment and warns them about the danger their choices create in their own lives. These tactics are both forms of transactional leadership, which can sometimes be effective in providing short term extrinsic motivation, but often lead to shallow relationships and potential resentment between leaders and followers (McCleskey, 2014). Herzberg (2003) lends an even harsher view to these tactics, as he would label them as negative KITA's, or "kicks in the ass", and claims that they are not at all effective motivators.

Need for Community and Relatedness

From Maslow's description of a need for belongingness (1943), to the need for relatedness outlined in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), there are many sociological theories that describe an innate human need for close, caring, and supportive relationships. In the case of the boys in this film, many of them do not have such relationships available to them. Some have strained dynamics with family members due to their incarceration, and others have lost close friends due to gang violence. Virtually all the boys have become socially and emotionally isolated due to their circumstances, and the prison fails to provide or foster these relationships within the walls. SDT also describes a natural tendency to seek out these relationships when this need is not met, and this is evidenced in the movie by the boys identifying with the gangs in their community. This

situation presents a problem within the organization: unless the centre can help the residents find a new sense of belonging, the boys will continue to fulfil their needs through gang membership.

Possible Solutions

Organizations that are prepared to adapt when their objectives are not met are more successful over the long run. This is a tall order for any prison system, however, as their structures are antiquated and heavily departmentalized; not allowing for flexibility. Still, it may be possible to create change through efforts designed to free up this rigidity and combat the beliefs and policies that keep it stuck in the past. For the Kilpatrick Detention Center, this is precisely what happened when Sean Porter created a sports team with new behavioral norms, but it was not the only potential solution. We will begin to explore a few other approaches that may have been effective.

Change The Culture

It may be possible to improve rates of rehabilitation through a change in organizational culture within the prison. If management were to clearly define a vision for what the organization is trying to achieve, and unify the staff on that focal point, it could naturally shift how the residents are perceived and align the efforts of the staff toward that objective (Collins & Porras, 1996). Organizational norms and formalization can be restructured by selecting employees based on new cultural values. This could be difficult however, as sociologists like Emile Durkheim consider organizations to be a product of their environment, and the environment that this organization resides in is one of poverty and gang violence. A member of this community may not be seen as legitimate if they do not conform to norms of gang loyalty and retaliation. Contrarily, other sociologists such as Max Weber argue

that the environment is a product of the organizations within it, so changing the culture from inside the prison may change the culture of the community itself.

Elect a Transformational Leader

The low rates of rehabilitation could be due to the absence of a clear role model in the lives of the residents. A new leader could demonstrate acceptable behavior instead of punishing undesired behavior. Challenges with this solution may arise due to the current perceptions of prison systems within the community. A transformational leader would need to work against this perspective to be seen as a role model amongst the residents. In the movie, we saw Sean Porter come up against some of these cultural and structural barriers, but with the right effort it may be accomplished. This type of change would be considered an organizational paradigm shift, where traditional ways of operating become contested and radical change results. The leader could also set a new core ideology for the organization by emphasizing the need to let go of the past, including the residents' pasts, and demonstrate that the prison has the capability to reinvent itself (Handy, C. 1995). Solidifying this new reality could be done within a team dynamic where norms are established and older methods of relating between prisoners are not reinforced.

Provide Growth Opportunities

It could be argued however, that both these solutions would only be effective because they create new opportunities for the inmates to grow. The prison could be looked at as a platform that provides for the basic needs of the individuals while at the same time providing them with options for their futures. Indeed, this is not a new concept as many prisons in Scandinavian countries have seen meaningful results with this model (Denny, M. 2016). The responsibility of an inmate's rehabilitation is placed on the individual's shoulders, rather than the

institution's, by removing obstacles to improvement and giving the residents free reign of their own development. It is believed that every individual is intrinsically motivated to pursue their own progress once they are no longer concerned about basic survival, and so the problem of inspiring inmates to rehabilitate themselves could be resolved this way (Herzberg, H. 2003). The emphasis on providing stability and direction to the inmates is controversial however, as the previously mentioned cultural barriers still exist inside the community: that violence is to be met with punishment. Providing residents with added resources would also be challenging as the communities that the men came from were stricken with poverty. It would be difficult to justify these expenses to policy makers while many within the outer community lack basic resources.

The Solution

In the movie, the problem was resolved by Sean Porter successfully modelling his vision for the inmates through his determination and strength of character. He was able to convince the boys of their own self-worth through this vision and provide them with the intrinsic motivation required to change their lives for the better. In other words, he acted as a transformational leader in the organizational context of the Kilpatrick Detention Center, and our analysis agrees with this approach. He saw the problems in the centre's rehabilitation effort and created the motivational environment the residents needed to achieve personal growth through formalization and structural changes. The solution he crafted allowed the inmates to form a supportive team which initiated a positive cultural identity shift within the organization, making the centre a more constructive and optimistic environment. These changes in the organization directly improved rates of recidivism and the quality of life for the inmates in a

lasting way. Through concepts in Organizational Behaviour, we found Sean Porter's approach to be congruent with modern understandings of corporate culture.

Structure and Community

This film demonstrates how a successful transformational leader can provide security and confidence through formal structure and a powerful sense of community. Firstly, Sean used formalization to ensure that all the boys would have a sense of commonality and mutual understanding on the football team. He accomplished this by stating everyone would be working together on the same things and spending time studying, eating, and practicing together. Once rules and expectations were made clear, the boys had a more structured environment to properly form team dynamics. These team dynamics were essential to developing a sense of community among the residents because it built trust among the boys within the group. This newfound community may alleviate the need for the boys to seek refuge and association within gangs in their community, as discussed previously. By replacing gang associations with the football team, the centre will be able to provide a secure, safe platform for the residents to seek growth opportunities, something it was clearly failing to do previously.

Growth Opportunities and Motivation

The first examples of personal growth amongst the residents occurred after a disappointing loss to a high school football team. Despite the upsetting result, Sean demonstrated strong transformational leadership skills to push the team to work harder. We see growth develop when the coach shares the true meaning and vision behind the team, beyond that of just football. He explains that, as a team, they can support each other and face challenges together despite their differences. This knowledge strengthens the group, the residents begin to

show signs of personal and collective growth, and Sean presents his transformational vision: that the boys do not want to be perceived as losers anymore, and that they have the ability to be winners. This idea of becoming winners not only applies to each football game, but in their everyday life. Through working together and going up against challenges, the inmates created confidence in both themselves and in the team overall. The boys bought-in to his vision and created a shift in culture, a strengthened community, and began the path towards growth in their lives.

Consequences

We must acknowledge the positive and negative consequences of the transformation leader. To start off, one negative consequence was that there was a lot of pressure for the transformational leader personally, since he was the only individual taking on an exceptionally large task. Because of this, we saw the coach snap at one of the games. This resulted in some backfire and loss of trust between the team and the coach. A positive consequence was that we could see clear growth and rehabilitation amongst the boys. By the end of the movie, the biggest takeaway was that the team wanted to improve for themselves and not just because the coach told them to. With the help of a solid structure provided by a transformational leader, everyone began to develop motivation from within themselves.

Lessons Learned

There are some concepts within the study of organizational behavior that were strongly supported by our analysis of “Gridiron Gang.” Specifically, Frederick Herzberg’s understanding of motivation was evident beyond fault. His ideas on the ineffectiveness of punishment as motivation, and the intrinsic drivers of personal growth, were congruent with not only the plot of

the movie, but also with modern studies of Norwegian prisons. Being that an organization is any group of people with a common purpose, it is remarkable that Herzberg's theories scale effectively to the size of an entire community. Be it between two people or two thousand, it seems that giving others the opportunity to grow and improve themselves is more motivational and productive than criticism and threats.

We also learned that cultural transformation could happen in even the most rigid of organizations, since the plot of this movie was based on true events. Sean Porter is a real person, and he demonstrated through his actions that anyone can become an agent of change if they are willful enough in their vision. It is important to recognize however, that this will needs to be tempered with the previous observations about growth and threats. If an individual finds themselves in a position of leadership, wherever they are going, they will get there faster if they support the growth of others.

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