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Case Study

Adopting a Socio-Economic Approach to Management for a Shorter Waiting List: Case of an Autism Center

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Abstract

Providing education to special needs individuals is both their right and the responsibility of the state and the community. In the 21st century, and with all the developments and evolving the world is witnessing, it is a shame to see individuals with autism not properly schooled or educated just because of lack of money while others are on a long waitlist because the school or center where they should be admitted does not have enough budget to school them and is facing a challenge to remain sustainable. Those organizations have a societal mission in the first place; however, and because of their limited budget and in order to be sustainable, they can only accept a fixed and limited number of cases. What if there were ways to help these organizations manage the scarce resources they have? What if the organization's efficiency and the employees' performance are increased so that to decrease the hidden costs in the hope of efficiently managing the organization and thus manage the money through investing in a learning process accomplished through the socio-economic approach. This research paper investigates how adopting a socio-economic approach to management can enhance the performance in an Autism center and therefore broaden the margin they have in the hope of lessening the waiting list and accepting more children with autism.

Keywords: Managerial Approaches; Non-Governmental Organizations; Societal Mission; Socio-Economic; Third Sector; Waiting List

Introduction

Trying to do good deeds does not necessarily mean that the organization will guarantee success. It can easily fail to deliver its mission; therefore, it is crucial that while trying to do those good deeds, the organization does that well. The paper takes the example of a non-profit, non-governmental autism center. The past decade has witnessed the outbreak of what has come to be known as the "Third Sector Organizations". A huge growth in both number and the scope of these organizations has taken place all around the world [1]. NGOs and non-profit organizations are

a sub-group of third sector organizations. According to Lewis, "NGOs are usually understood to be the group of organizations engaged in development and poverty reduction work at local, national, and global levels around the world" [1]. The discovery of the non-governmental organizations by experts and organizations took place in the 1980's according to [2]; however, the authors believe that these organizations have been operating long before their discovery in the 80's.

The NGO sector is somehow different than the rest of the sectors, and it has been singled out for being different in so many ways when it is compared to the commercial or government sectors [3]. Though very diversified, almost all NGOs share similar things especially in the management department since they all need to manage three areas:

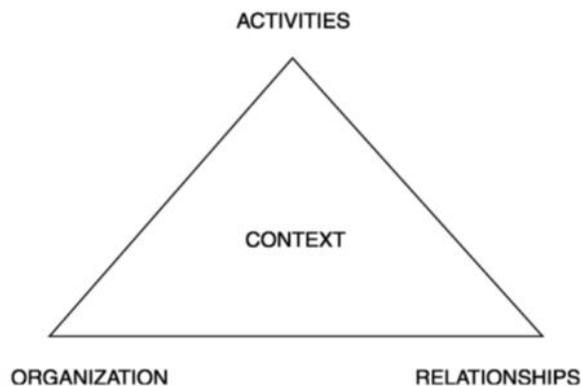


Figure 1: The three inter-related areas of the NGO management challenge.

The above (Figure 1) represents the three inter-related areas of the NGO management challenge as described by David Lewis in his book “The Management of Non-Governmental Development Organizations: An Introduction”. Lewis (2004) [1] explains that all NGOs need to manage these three inter-related areas: one related to the organization and it includes the internal structure and processes, one related to activities that can be projects, developmental activities, workshops...etc and the third one is related to the organization’s relationships that could be with either the government, ministries, public or private sector and other NGOs. While many experts think that fundraising is the key to success of NGOs, William Berther and Evan Berman in their book entitled “Third Sector Management: The Art of Managing Nonprofit Organizations” think that this is not enough, and that the way you manage non-governmental organization, the strategic planning, staffing and training play a major role in the success of NGOs [4].

Historically, NGO’s have been reluctant in adopting managerial approaches for several reasons; mainly because they think that the money they have should be spent on projects to help others more than spending it on administrative or developmental reasons. As Smillie terms it, there is a “powerful public myth that development should be cheap” [5]. “we cannot afford not affording” and therefore there is a need to show that investing in teaching management skills will be rewarding on the long run since through the socio-economic approach to management, the organizations will not only pinpoint their dysfunctions and discover hidden costs but also will learn that an organization is both social and economic and that the social affects the financial side and that through this approach they can prevent future recurrence of dysfunctions. The subject of NGO management has recently started to get more attention and many managerial approaches have been adopted. Crawford & Bryce (2003) [6] explain that when it comes to the development context, NGO’s role is to implement the projects

they have at hand. It is assumed that the decision making in these organizations is given to the leaders and that the organization has the consensus culture rather than the hierarchical. As mentioned earlier, the differences that exist require a modified and adopted type of management rather than a strictly traditional type of management. Khang & Moe (2008) [7] proposed the adaptation of the traditional management to cope with NGOs realities. The autism center is an NGO and it has been facing a difficult challenge to be financially sustainable. The main problem is that these organizations are not business oriented at the origin. Their orientation and culture are not much sensitized and open to the need of rigor in management. There is a need to bring this kind of culture since it is not part of their vision and mission because they are more oriented towards their societal objectives. There is also the need to learn, balance and diversify their resource and be more efficient.

Materials and Methods

The paper studies an NGO and a non-profit autism center. The paper is based on the findings of an intervention-action research conducted in an autism center as part of the doctoral thesis. It adopts the Socio-Economic Approach to Management that was created by Professor Henri Savall and developed and implemented by the Socio-Economic Institute of Firm and Organizations- ISEOR research center. The Socio-Economic Approach to Management is “a complex theory-building research done in the post-positivistic epistemology within a social constructionist ontology using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis, qualimetrics” [8]. In fact, the methodology of the socio-economic approach that relies on the qualimetrics approach uses not only qualitative and quantitative but also financial data to reach a common representative system shared by all the actors in an organization. According to Savall & Zardet (2011) [9], the Socio-Economic Approach to Management is based on the hypothesis that an organization is a sum total of the permanent interaction of structures and behaviors and the organizational economic level depend on the interaction between the structure and the human behaviors of the organization. Savall believes in what is termed as “a double loop interaction between social and economic factors in organizations, between behaviors and structures, and between the quality of life in organizations and their economic performance.” [9]. Kurt Lewin believed that there is “No action without research; no research without action” and that’s why researching should be prior to taking action. The paper is based on a research intervention and the findings can help in taking actions and steps to solve some of the problems. Intervention research takes the best of two worlds: the world of theory and the world of action; it forms a bridge between action, practice and theory. The tools and methods of the Socio-Economic intervention are organized around three axes: The Tool Axis, the Change Axis, and the Policy Axis.

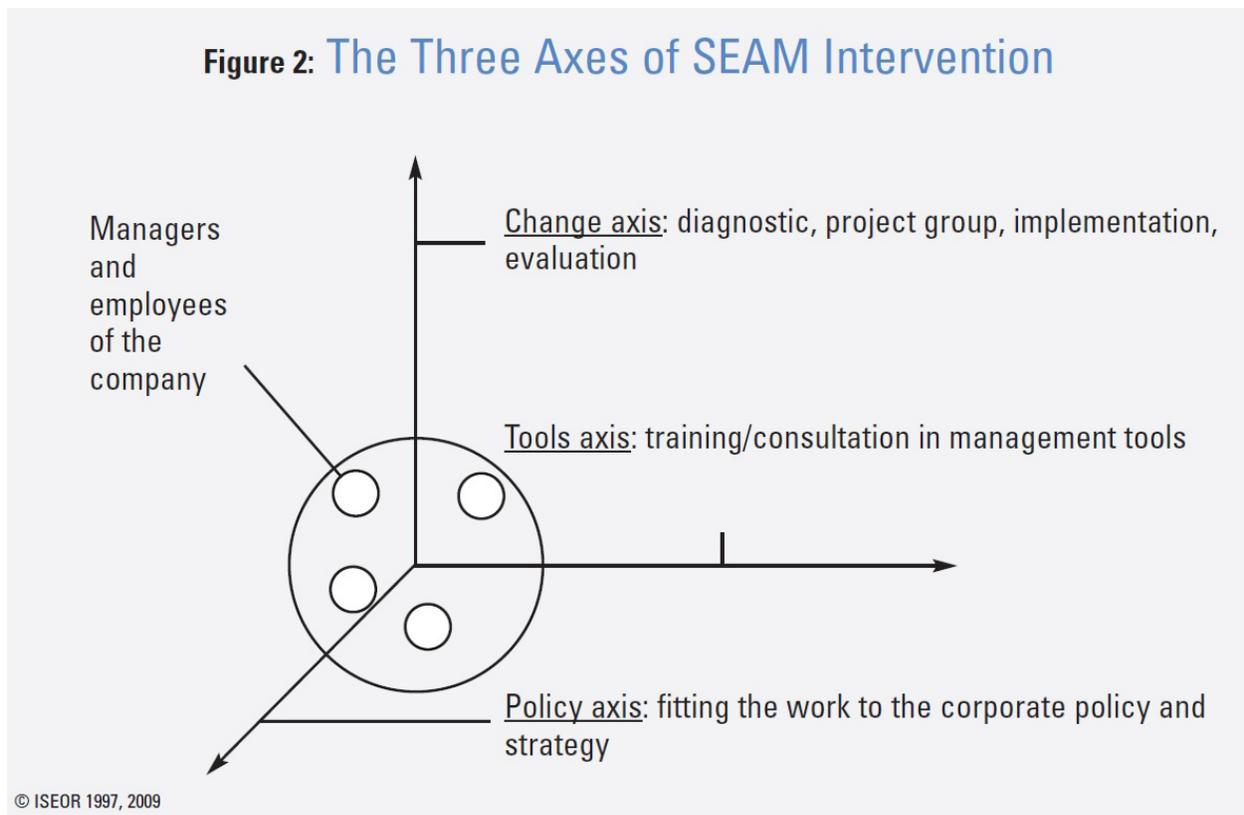


Figure 2: The three axes of seam intervention.

SEAM, through the tools axis provides a collaborative and cooperative training (Figure 2). The six tools of the tools axis are periodically negotiable activity, internal-external strategic action plan, priority action plan, piloting logbook, time management and competency grid. The autism center applied the following tools:

- The competency grid: A sort of chart that visually represents the skills of each and every team member. Divided into rows and columns, each row represents an actor's skill while each column represents the operation to be implemented within the team. This tool is an important management tool because it represents the intangible assets of the organization since it is a qualitative evaluation of the integrated training investment or lack of it. Add to this, this tool allows to visually see the available skills not only in a systematic way but also in a graph form. It would be updated semiannually at the same time as preparing the priority action plan to prepare programs for occupational training as well as being used in half-year assessment to enhance training plans. The competency grid aimed at helping the center to be upgraded on a continuous basis. They help the organization and its top management and executives to "switch from a centralized to a more participative

management style [10].

- Time management tool. It is dedicated at improving the quality of time given to agility. The purpose is to make people analyze how they spend their time. The socio economic researchers believe that when actors do their own time analysis, they would be surprised by how much time is spent on a not-so-important work, and then they can find time to dedicate to value creating chores.
- The Internal External Strategic Action Plan is a plan put for a period of 3 to 5 years whereby the organization classifies and enumerates the prioritized strategies that must be taken for the organization development. The designed strategy would be updated and revised periodically, and modifications would be made that would be communicated to the various actors who are involved which requires continuous meetings of communication and coordination between the decision makers and the actors.
- The priority actions plan PAP is a tool through which each unit can prioritize its objective. The purpose of using the PAP is to focus on the IESAP and increase the chances of

having it applied. PAP is constructed based on two sources that make designing the PAP doable: The first one is the firm's external strategy. The second source resorts to the internal strategy and is through the diagnosis of dysfunctions that was made based on the interviews conducted by the intervener aiming at preventing dysfunctions. Strategic plans are transformed into concrete actions and all steps are scheduled to reach the objectives. In addition to this, PAP helps in identifying dysfunctions and preventing their recurrence. The coordination and communication achieved, all the actions that stem from strategy and analysis of dysfunction are listed and managers can estimate and therefore take tentative decisions to prioritize certain actions, postpone or even abandon some other actions.

- The change axis includes the diagnosis, project, implementation of solutions and evaluation and the tools of change are used in order to empower the actors and the third and final axis is policy axis and its contribution is through the strategy and change energy.

Findings

The management tools of change helped at developing the managerial dimension of the managers who became not just leaders but also pilots of change. The internal external strategic plans made the external objectives that are strategic coherent with the internal targets. It combined external strategy with internal plans for the aim of reducing dysfunctions.

These major forces were translated into objectives that were integrated within the strategic plans. The center avoided the loss of energy because this was a limitation to the strategic development. In addition to setting the external objectives of the center: reaching out to new categories of donors with international scope and getting in contact with embassies and united nations NGOs, the IESAP also made sure that these external objectives are in harmony with the internal targets mainly in the know-how of technology and the recognition of the importance of human potential. With the socio-economic approach and with the Internal External Strategic Action Plan as its managerial tool, the center was able to combine both external strategy and internal domain which is a point of strength since most organizations disregard the importance of the internal domain concerning technologies and human potential and focus more on reaching new markets and developing their services and products.

In addition to the assessment of hidden costs and adjustment of training, the Socio-Economic Approach to Management includes an important innovative tool: the analysis of dysfunctions. The analysis of dysfunctions plays an important role in the approach that considers "there is always a difference between

the situation expected by the actors and the actual situation" [11]. These dysfunctions can be categorized into six domains: working conditions, work organization, communication-coordination-cooperation, time management, integrated training and strategic implementation. Another point of strength is the economic balance. It is a financial study, an assessment or a tentative calculation to evaluate a project and see if it will have enough return on investment while taking into consideration the means necessary to implement it over a certain period of time. By applying this approach, the center was able to have an idea about what project is necessary and what project is just a waste of time and money. The socioeconomic approach to management through the competency grid and time management was able to identify training needs and thus saving money that was wasted on unnecessary training. The interviews helped identify the dysfunctions and the root causes that were reasons for money lost.

The Socio-Economic Approach to Management contributes in improving the work organization. The NGO becomes more sensitized to the fact that they need some sort of management approach and that it is not money consuming nor time consuming to invest in management because the returns will be good on the long term. They are aware that their working conditions are affecting their work organization and that the stress and the tiring environment at work can be somehow lessened by taking care of certain work organization measures like the distribution of tasks and missions, making the job more interesting and giving more attention to how they formulate their rules and regulations. This is something that can be considered as generic and would be applied in all sorts of organizations: if you can rephrase your sentences to give a more positive connotation when formulating your rules and regulations then this will eventually have a positive effect on the actor reading them.

Communication coordination and cooperation plays an important role in any organization and with the Socio-Economic Approach to Management, the NGO could easily see how important it is to have regular meeting as it will lead to better coordination and improved communication and thus more teamwork as it is a major factor in the success of the special needs kids teaching and this has also been proven in the literature. Through the socio economic tools of time management, the center is now aware of how to identify low-value activities and lessen them which give more room for them to be doing essential chores. The competency grid taught how to identify skills and need for training on an individual basis and how important it is to design the training and workshops and plan for training needs. The center is now aware of the importance of implementing a proactive strategy with political and strategic decisions and that technology is a must and investing in it is never a waste of time and resource.

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