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Corporate Drumming, Flow and Team Efficacy: The Use of Drum Circles and Shared Flow Experiences to Promote Team Efficacy

Barry Hemmings
University of Wollongong

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Description

Drum circles are popular examples of team building activities and there are aspects of the drumming activity that mark them as being somewhat different to other offerings in this space. Particularly, the activity is often completed without speech or interaction of a hierarchical nature. Also, this apparently simple activity appears to produce strong positive emotions in participants. Of interest in this research is that the drumming activity appears to include many of the attributes and conditions that support the presence of the psychological concept of flow. Also, the activity is group based so there may be the presence of a group based version of flow known as social flow (Walker, 2010). At the individual level, flow is known to be associated with self efficacy but there is little research to demonstrate this relationship at the group or team level.

Location

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Corporate drumming, flow and team efficacy: The use of drum circles and shared flow experiences to promote team efficacy

Higher Degree Research Student Conference Paper

Barry Hemmings - 3300705

Bh900@uow.edu.au

Abstract

Drum circles are popular examples of team building activities and there are aspects of the drumming activity that mark them as being somewhat different to other offerings in this space. Particularly, the activity is often completed without speech or interaction of a hierarchical nature. Also, this apparently simple activity appears to produce strong positive emotions in participants. Of interest in this research is that the drumming activity appears to include many of the attributes and conditions that support the presence of the psychological concept of flow. Also, the activity is group based so there may be the presence of a group based version of flow known as social flow (Walker, 2010). At the individual level, flow is known to be associated with self efficacy but there is little research to demonstrate this relationship at the group or team level.

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1. Introduction

The drum circle is unique in team building in that social processes are limited to the observation and proximity of others during the drumming activity (Bittman, Bruhn, Stevens, Westengard and Umbach, 2003). There is no interaction of a hierarchical nature (i.e. roles or leadership) that are more commonly seen features of many traditional team building activities (Klein et al., 2009). Instead, the activity quite simply involves a team or group of work colleagues sitting in a circle and playing djembe drums. Despite the apparent simplicity of the exercise, the experience for participants is one of great satisfaction and enjoyment (Bittman et al., 2003).

Given this relationship between an apparently simple exercise and a reported powerful effect, this research will work to increase the understanding of:

- The mechanisms within the drum circle that drive the reported effects. It is considered that the concept of flow may be at work in the circle but at a team or group level; and,
- The subsequent effects on the team of the activity. A group based version of Bandura's (1991) Social Cognitive Theory and concept of self efficacy may be an outcome of the activity.

Particularly, this research project will explore the relationship between the psychological concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) and subsequent perceptions of efficacy at the group level.

2. Key theoretical themes

2.1 Social or team flow

"Flow" is a subjective state that emerges when individuals are totally absorbed in interesting, challenging activities and tasks (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Flow describes in part the control of the surrounding environment so that distractions are managed (Jackson, 1995; Eisenberger, Jones, Stinglhamber, Shanock & Randall, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). With an extension of this into a management view, Salanova, Bakker and Llorens (2006) suggest that flow occurs at work whenever appropriate workplace resources are present.

A key detail of the conditions required for flow is the presence of a relationship between perceptions of efficacy or skill and a related challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). The premise here is that high skill and high challenge provide the opportunities for the achievement of flow. Also, it is perhaps a reasonable expectation that most humans when faced with a challenge will learn and will thus normalise the challenge. So, an ongoing requirement for the achievement of flow will be an

upward cycle of challenge and difficulty that is matched against ever improving skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

To gain some understanding of the potential relationship between the phenomenon of flow and drumming, the process that occurs within the drum circle will be examined as part of this research. At this early stage though, there are a number of striking similarities between the drum circle and the conditions required for flow as described by Csikszentmihalyi (2003). First of all, the drum circle typically includes a number of call and response episodes that increase in complexity during the course of the activity. These take the form of drum rhythm challenges where participants are coached into matching this challenge. When the challenge is met and normalised by the group, a new challenge is presented and the cycle commences again. Also, anecdotal evidence suggests that the experience within the drum circle is strongly participative and collaborative which seems to drive the exclusion of external distractions while attempting to achieve a state of harmony with rhythms that are being presented within the circle (Bittman et al., 2003, Bittman et al., 2001).

Figure 1 – Potential flow cycle within the drum circle

Importantly, given the participative structure of the drum circle, there is a possibility here that the activity may produce the experience of team or social flow as described in research by Walker (2010). This research used a survey method to examine reported levels of joy for participants in both single and group flow settings with the group flow condition scoring significantly higher than the singular flow condition (Walker, 2010). This research may (in part) explain the reported powerful

effects felt by team participants in the drumming activity. However, a closer examination of the drum circle phenomenon is required to better understand this.

Also, whilst the flow literature has focused predominantly on experiences of flow during work related tasks and controlling conditions thought to facilitate flow, a drum circle represents an activity that may create social flow without a direct relationship to the work tasks of a team. If so, it might be possible for teams to enhance their level of cohesion, efficacy and performance via the use of an activity that is high on intrinsic interest and enjoyment. Another interesting question relates to the frequency with which teams experience flow and whether there is an optimal "dose" required for teams to derive most benefit from social activities like drumming.

2.2 Team Efficacy

A broad view of team building and perhaps drumming might consider aspects of return on investment for team building activities which are generally difficult to quantify (Williams, Graham and Baker, 2003). A more precise view however would be to consider specific effects such as team efficacy that, if present, might predict improved outcomes from the team (Lin and Peng, 2010). In that, the conditions within the drum circle described above may be related to the social factors predicted by Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991). Within this theory, Bandura introduces the concepts of self influence and judgment as key ongoing drivers of behaviour via the mechanisms of thought, affect and motivation (Bandura, 1991). Team efficacy has similar characteristics to self efficacy and a similar relationship between beliefs, judgment and levels of performance are considered to be at work (DeRue et al., 2010, Prussia and Kinicki, 1996).

Of interest here is that Hawkins (1992) suggests that concepts of efficacy are not necessarily exclusive drivers of behaviour. Perhaps most especially because perceptions and judgements of efficacy are in part driven by performance. This then presents as an opportunity for the current research. Which is to examine whether the implied relationship that exists between self-efficacy and individual flow also exists at the team or group level and also to consider the direction of the relationship between team efficacy and team performance. Does the presence of team efficacy drive performance or can a pure performance activity such as drumming drive team efficacy?

3. Conclusion

Whilst self-efficacy is known to be central to individual flow experiences, little research has examined the relationship between social flow and efficacy at the team level (Lin & Peng, 2010). Also, the relationship between flow and self efficacy may be further informed by this research. For example, to take the above point made by Hawkins (1992) about the relationship between efficacy

and performance a step further, perhaps the creation of flow conditions are important precursors for the establishment of team efficacy and performance. Also, that an activity as apparently simple as a drum circle may provide the opportunity for a team to quickly and easily establish these conditions. Related questions may be the frequency with which teams experience flow and whether there is an optimal “dose” required for teams to derive most benefit from social activities like drumming.

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