

Leadership Skills Development: Co-Creating Sustainability through Indigenous Knowledge

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BACKGROUND

This 'leadership skills development methodology' was first implemented informally with the Kichwa Indigenous Community of Rio Blanco in the Amazon Rainforest in July 2009 (Vergara, 2015). At that time, the Community experienced the intrusion of an illegal mining company determined to deforest Kichwa ancestral lands. It is a common practice of mining companies to hire mercenaries to murder members of the indigenous population and eliminate interference. At the time, the Kichwa Community

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was contemplating violent strategies to defensively force the invading miners off the land. However, this intervention, in the form of the applied MIA methodology, prevented this course of (re)action and empowered the Community to expel the mining company through non-violent, legal process. By 2010, the Community had successfully expelled four other mining companies in the same manner. The Community did not previously have legal ownership of their land, but by 2011, all 45 extended families (472 people) obtained their property titles. These outcomes were possible because participants (in this case, the Kichwa Community) shifted their paradigms by becoming aware of their mental models or unknown assumptions and behaviors. The mental models of the Kichwa Community perpetuated feelings of victimization and the assumption of powerlessness in relation to western invaders. Reacting to these feelings and assumptions, they generated the sensation of empowerment by contemplating retaliatory violence. However, this was a deceptive sense of empowerment and their violent actions would only have led to unnecessary injury, death and police intervention in favor of the miners. The intervention and its applied methodology offered true empowerment by freeing them from their destructive mental models and helping them to uncover an effective, long-term solution.

Description of Participants and Settings

After witnessing these results with the Kichwa Community, we initiated three formal studies to evaluate the methodology through empirical and narrative data collection. Longitudinal studies are still being conducted in New York City, USA; Trondheim, Norway; and Ibarra, Ecuador, supported by higher education institutions. In 2012, students from Washington and Jefferson College went to the Amazon Rainforest and did multidisciplinary research. In 2013, the intervention was implemented at Teachers College, Columbia University. Later in 2014, it was administered at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and in 2015 the intervention was implemented at the Universidad Tecnica del Norte in Ecuador. Despite varied locations and cultures, the methodology introduced was always consistent. A course titled, 'Mindfulness Into Action Research with Grounded Theory' is now in 2016 is being offered at Teachers College, Columbia University. It is introducing MA and Doctoral students to the methodology while instituting a formal process of data collection.

Literature Construct

Through Indigenous knowledge, this methodology facilitated participants to observe their unknown behaviors (mindset). The process included cycles of reflection (reflexivity) in conjunction with Indigenous practices. Data suggest that participants develop a sense of being in a constant state of awareness (mindfulness) which is the very essence of our life. Thus, this literature review includes Indigenous knowledge, mindset, reflexivity and mindfulness.

Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous traditions make sense of the world based in certain principles from which they construct reality, being at the core a close interdependence with nature. Problem is that anthropologists, as social scientists, have focused in constructing "an intellectual order from culture" (Jolly, Emmerij, Ghai, & Lapeyre, 2004, p. 211). They have supported the perception of culture as dissociated from its deep embeddedness in a natural context. By making this relationship invisible they would have contributed to making it difficult for global decision-makers to create development policies and strategies more aligned

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