

Managing A Voluntary Organization

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ABSTRACT

This paper reveals the experience of a young member of a non-profitable organisation in managing a team of professionals in Brunei Darussalam. In a team, the experience of managing has not been as scary as expected; positions taken, however, must be firm and effective. Being a leader of the contingency approach type, actions and responses are based on circumstances. Marketing and managing changes need to be pursued as a new leader of a voluntary organization. Careful considerations and risks had to be contemplated to achieve progress. Decision making and trendsetting are not simple but can cause explosive reactions. A clear approach should be followed to influence positive argument in the collegiate group; the approach should be related to the strategic goals and, more importantly, is feasible in terms of financial stability. Her learning experiences in managing a voluntary organization are worthwhile as a prerequisite to managing an institution. The experience gained has taught her well how to be a manager; however, more knowledge will further improve and guide her in being an effective manager.

Keywords: Managing NGOs, leadership, change in marketing, managing change, voluntary organisation

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Introduction

The former Director-General of the Ministry of Education, Brunei Darussalam (2004), stated in a personal communication that ‘a leader who successfully manages an organization would be a good leader in managing an institution’. How far would her statement be true?

For the newly elected president of the Brunei Association for Science Education, BASE, managing the 26-year-old voluntary, non-profitable association was challenging, especially if possessing no management prerequisites. The seven months of chairing meetings, organizing national activities and making public speeches did not seem to remove

uncertainties about being a good and effective manager. Questions relating to making the right decisions and how to create innovative ideas and successful plans always linger. Inevitably, these doubts lead to critical self-questioning, such as, ‘how good am I as a leader, and how effective was my approach?’

MacBeath and McGlynn (2002) addressed similar questions, such as, ‘what makes good leaders? How are good leaders made? Can leadership be learned or is it a gift?’ The latter is reminiscent of the saying, ‘Am I a born leader or born to lead?’ What is leadership anyway? Foster (1989) argued that the term leadership covers a great deal and seems to



mean whatever the user intends. Sergiovanni (2001) defined leadership as follows:

- 1) Leadership means influencing parents, teachers, and students to follow the leader's vision (visionary leadership).
- 2) Leadership means influencing parents, teachers and students to identify, understand, and find solutions to the problems that they face (problem-solving leadership).
- 3) Leadership means not only pursuing useful goals that meet the needs of parents, teachers, and students, but also goals that elevate them to a higher moral level (transformational leadership).
- 4) Leadership means enhancing the purpose, meaning and significance that parents, teachers, and students experience by serving shared ideas and ideals (moral leadership).
- 5) Leadership means being practical by selecting means to achieve purposes that take into account the loosely connected, messy, and generally non-linear characteristics of schools (educational organizations as organized hierarchies).

In leadership, there is always a leader, at least one follower and the purpose of leading or being led. Smyth (1989) argued that 'traditional stances in leadership take for granted the one-directional flow from the leader to the led...without realizing the reality in which a junior member...may be the leader and the [president] the follower'. The leader in BASE is the president, followed by the vice-president, the honorary secretary, the honorary treasurer and five other executive members. The management system in BASE is a collegiate one (Noble and Pym, 1989), in which decisions are agreed upon, in contrast to the efficient bureaucratic hierarchy model (Weber 1989), since all the executive committee members take active roles in moving the organization towards success, despite the presence of a president in the organization. Bourdillon (1945) stated that 'a voluntary organization properly speaking is an organization which, whether its workers are paid and unpaid, is initiated and governed by its own members without external control.'

All the stakeholders in BASE, the so-called Executive Committee members (EXCO) are unpaid, and their involvement is thus voluntary and caused purely by passion for progressive scientifically literate citizens. In defining voluntary organizations,

Brenton (1985) wrote that 'a voluntary organization should be a formal body, constitutionally separate from government, non-profit distributing and of public benefit'. Poulton (1988) argued that 'the difficulty with the definition rests in the degree of dependency by the organization upon state sources of funding, since many voluntary bodies have become increasingly dependent upon such funds'. BASE funding is sponsored by local companies and shows no profit. Osborne (1996) defined voluntary and non-profit organizations (VNPOs) as follows:

- They must be formally structured – the extent and nature of this formalization can vary ... (but must be) apparent enough to separate them out from informal gatherings and meetings.
- They should be founded independently of state control – they exist because a certain group of people wants them to, not because there is some legislative requirement for them.
- They should be governed by a management committee that is able to decide its own composition, either at the behest of its membership or by its own decisions, and have independent decision-making capacity.
- They have a distinctive pattern of financial management – they cannot distribute any surplus accrued by their mission-critical activities, but must re-invest it in services
- The motivation of a VNPO should not be based upon financial gain, but rather should hold some normative voluntary value...it includes activity which has an element of self-benefit....It may mean the participation of volunteers... management or service-delivery activities of an organization.

In the light of being voluntary, BASE is presumed to develop its members, particularly the EXCO, both personally and professionally in terms of administrating and being key players in the organization of events. All the EXCO were educators, ranging from teachers to administrators, including once a director, who met fortnightly on Friday afternoons to discuss upcoming activities and events. BASE activities are conducted nationwide and are expected by schools (all levels) to be implemented every year.

The BASE president, as a leader, is obliged to be a motivator, facilitator, action-regulator and time-

ticker, making sure that planned activities succeed and hopefully have risk-free consequences. As stated by Senge (1999):

‘... a position of leadership does not necessarily mean more rights and privileges; it means more obligations. Leaders have to be more careful about their behaviour. They are no longer judged by the memos they send out or presentations they make, but on the actions and results.

... quality leadership is a complex, situational issue ... good leadership doesn't emanate from different people in the same way. But if ... [one] can articulate the generic shift from “leader as commander” to “leader as servant,” people will begin to recognize its rewards – not only in the effectiveness of organizations, but personally. Paradoxically, the “leader as commander” has less freedom and authority. Every commander is usually following directions from another commander ...

A servant leader, by contrast, has the authority to do what he or she thinks is right, and to be responsible for the consequences. This doesn't mean imposing the individual's will in an egotistical, absolute way. It means being sensitive, open, and engaged in the system as ... [one] possibly can, and yet having a sense of where your part of the organization needs to go. It also means being willing to show ... [one's] vulnerability. If ... [you] try to hide ... [the] flaws, then ... [you] can't provide good leadership.’

Despite this, although the BASE president has the power to manipulate actions and decision-making, it is particularly important that the dissolution of negative ideas is discussed with the collegiate body both rationally and emotionally and in a respectful manner. This was also highlighted in Fullan's ‘leadership rules’ (1991).

Background

This paper will consider my leadership in managing BASE, one of the oldest professional voluntary non-profit organizations in Brunei Darussalam, and how my approach may be able to strengthen BASE's roots so that it may stand for at least three more decades, serving its purpose as a dynamic association to promote and improve Science and Technology Education in Brunei Darussalam, through collaboration and partnerships with relevant agencies.

BASE was born in 1978, voluntarily initiated by a group of science educators to achieve the following objectives:

- To improve the teaching of Science and Technology;

- To provide a medium through which the opinions of teachers may be expressed in educational matters;

- To promote regular meetings of educators concerned with the teaching of Science and Technology; and

- To promote lectures, meetings and discussions with other scientific bodies.

(These objectives were replaced in the constitution after my management began.)

Since then, BASE had organized various activities in regard to its clients, educators and students at all levels (Primary, Secondary and Tertiary) in Brunei Darussalam. The activities (Http: 1) conducted for science educators were professional meetings, seminars, symposiums, conferences, scientific visits and computer courses. The activities for students were:

- Science Project (first started in 1978)
- Science Quiz (first introduced in 1983)
- Science Essay Writing
- Science Art Photography
- Natural Science Award Scheme
- Young Scientists Badge Scheme (for students in Primary classes, first launched in 1988/1999)
- Science Art Poster (for students in Primary 4, 5 and 6, newly introduced in 1994)

BASE is well known for its two major annual activities: first, BASE Science and Technology Week, an event that incorporates all student-based innovative and interesting activities to stimulate the imagination and creativity of youths and Science Teachers in a conference for science educators, based on a theme (Http: 1). Second, Brunei National Science Camp (first introduced in 1990), an activity that provides an inspiring environment to students for the promotion of individual, personal and educational development through ‘out-of school’ activities (Http: 1). These events were advertised through the Assistant Director of Schools who circulated them to all schools. In all activities, participants could either join BASE activities at no charge or be charged the minimum registration fee of one pound (B\$3) per person.

The service of BASE was out-of-classroom activities, which are organized with permission during school terms, the dates being carefully planned not to

coincide with examination periods. Participants in events were from different schools and were able to conduct science projects that were not commonly offered by teachers in schools. Participants were provided with free meals, tents (during camping), comfortable display areas, certificates and prizes for those who won competitions. Participants' fees were normally fully paid by their schools.

BASE, as a voluntary non-profit organization (VNPO), used to be funded fully by Brunei Shell Petroleum Company Sdn. Bhd. Since the downturn in oil prices around 1999/2000, the main sponsor, Brunei Shell Petroleum Company Sdn. Bhd., only allowed funding once budget proposals had been made. Competition for funding might sooner or later come to exist between government sectors and VNPOs, as more similar activities evolve. Being a mature academic organization, BASE is careful not to be old-fashioned, and thus comes out with its own strategic goals, which are to become the purpose of BASE for at least another twenty years. The new stakeholders in BASE (in the age range of 25 – 40 years) since March 2004 will face more challenges, not only in raising funds but also in how to market BASE as a competitive service-provider against other VNPOs and certain government activity enthusiasts. Hannan & Freeman (1977) state that 'an organization is seen as in competition with other organizations for resources but selects the most appropriate structures to cope with changing conditions.'

Managing BASE

I joined BASE five years ago at the age of 23, as an ordinary committee member, and was simultaneously a newly qualified teacher. It is a part-time job for all stakeholders, who are mostly educators. A year later, I was voted to be Assistant Secretary. Another promotion took place the following year to hold the two-year position as the Honorary Secretary. In March 2004, I was elected as the new President of BASE for the session 2004 – 2006, and am still an education officer / teacher to earn a living. The experience of moving up the ladder as an apprentice has led me to a position where I am the highest stakeholder in the association. In the history of BASE, presidents are normally higher authority figures such as secondary school principals, curriculum officers, policy-makers and directors of government sectors who are well known to the public as leaders in their respective areas. Even so, not all of the previous presidents have shown the leadership expected, that is, they were able neither to fulfill the expectations of BASE clients in organizing the

annual activities nor to persuade the EXCO to implement creative ideas.

Being a 'coordinator' (Belbin, 1981), within seven months I managed to convince the committees to implement the new strategic goals that had been established in 2002. These strategic goals (Appendix 1) were also proposed for insertion in the BASE constitution to replace the former aims and objectives. The replacement was announced during my very first opening speech as a newly elected President during the Annual General Meeting in March 2004.

In accordance with these strategic goals, I introduced a new annual programme called BASE CONNECTS in addition to the two programmes mentioned earlier, that is BASE Science and Technology Week and BASE Science Camp. BASE CONNECTS is a two-day event, which comprises the following activities:

- Self-Developing BASE Discount Cards Programme
- BASE Connects Programme
- BASE Futuristic Science Programme
- BASE Science Realization Programme
- BASE Voluntary Programme
- BASE Sci-Tainment
- BASE Members Competition

It took four meetings (lasting until two months after election) to conceptualize the proposal and eventually persuade the EXCO to conduct the activities. A number of issues were discussed, such as the financial commitment, the participants, the recipients, the number of days to hold the event, the venue, the Guest of Honour, teachers' permission to be absent from school, and many others. I managed to change the negative mindset of the collegiate group as the problems that arose were tackled critically. I took a risk in implementing the programme since it was outside the budget. BASE CONNECTS was successfully organized in August 2004, receiving satisfactory comments in the evaluation forms returned. I learnt how to manage the association only from experience and from my former BASE presidents, as mentioned by Bennis (1986) in his 'basic ingredients of leadership'.

I also took the initiative in improving marketing (as intended in the strategic goals) by means of increasing the number of memberships of students, educators and members of the public. Marketing BASE is one of the focuses of my management for BASE, as it could raise its standards in comparison to

other VNPOs and improve self-funding for our organization. Marketing, according to Osborne (1996), is 'identifying the needs of your target audience and satisfying them according to your objectives'.

Marketing BASE

In the past, the maximum number of educators joining BASE as ordinary members was about thirty, and this number fluctuated until one member, Mrs. X, introduced in 2002 a discount card membership which caused the number to cumulatively increase. At that time, I was the Honorary Secretary.

The membership attracted not only educators but also a major number of students. The discount card members had the benefits of purchasing materials such as books, meals, clothes, and housing appliances at a reduced cost in selected establishments in Brunei Darussalam. Mrs. X advertised this scheme through letters sent to the heads of forty-seven secondary schools and one hundred and eighty-seven primary schools in Brunei Darussalam. Mrs. X personally hired two foreign helpers to handle the application forms and take the photos of new members in each school. More than fifty schools were approached over a two month period. Student members paid three pounds (B\$10) for annual membership while educators or those known as professional members had to pay five pounds (B\$15) for the same benefits. Each member had to pay 50p (B\$1.50) for photographs. More than a thousand members joined BASE to get the discount card.

In the letter sent by Mrs. X, there was a statement that the card would be dispatched within forty-five days. The letter, however, was not shown to the higher stakeholders of BASE, even though BASE agreed and appreciated her work in successfully attracting more members to join BASE. Mrs. X's approach in some ways agreed with the new strategic goals in creating more self-funding for BASE from membership fees. Furthermore, businesses agreed to give discounts without charging BASE. The decision made by BASE in approving Mrs. X's approach at that time was also due to the background idea that, by possessing the cards, members would always remember BASE, and if they remembered BASE, they would remember science, and if they remembered science this would mean that BASE had achieved its aim in promoting Science and Technology to all.

Unfortunately, this scheme had a number of drawbacks. First, the discount cards were made in

another country, thus delays in procurement were unavoidable. Secondly, the company would only allow the printing of cards if there were least 1000 applications at one go, to reduce the costs of printing, for otherwise members would have to be charged at a higher membership rate. Then, since there were too many application forms, the hired helpers became confused and mixed up some of the forms. The cards were delayed eighteen months, by which time the period of discount agreement with most establishments had expired. Some members never received their cards due to the mix up, not forgetting those cards that had incorrect pictures or names. Who is to be blamed for this problem? Everyone would like to blame Mrs. X, but this is a consequence for which BASE stakeholders must take responsibility. 'Managers of VNPOs are managing services on behalf of the general public, for groups of workers within the public services as well as on behalf of themselves' (Osborne, 1996).

No further steps were taken for one whole year, other than waiting for the cards to arrive. I kept raising this issue as an agenda item in every meeting, but not much was resolved. As the Honorary Secretary at that time, I was left to answer queries and cries about withdrawing from BASE. BASE was left with no choice but to allow members to withdraw. This 'soft labour' kept going on for months, until a letter was published in a commercial bulletin sent by a student's mother to complain about the BASE discount card. That action definitely put the focus on BASE, making me step forward to reply to the letter (Appendix 2).

The decision to reply quickly was brave and life-saving in the eyes of the former president, who then proposed me as the next BASE leader. In such circumstances, I was a 'complete finisher' (Belbin, 1981), and this action was the stepping-stone to my leadership.

At present, I have managed to induce the EXCO to buy an instant card-printing machine and pre-designed plastic cards (Fig.1) (again not in the budget proposal), costing around two thousand pounds (~B\$7000). Although I failed to get capital items from local banks, this saves BASE in two ways: one, BASE may earn back the trust of its former clients, although this will take time. Secondly, BASE has more affiliations with local establishments, giving more benefits to members by getting discounts in more shops, including hotels, workshops and many others.

The new machine was publicly announced on national television during a morning interview prior to the BASE CONNECTS event. I also took the risk of announcing a reduction in the membership fee for BASE EXCO, which was then publicly announced on national television (on the same show) and in a speech made during BASE CONNECTS. The membership fee was reduced from three pounds (BB\$10) annually for student members to three pounds (B\$10) biennially; this is similar to professional members with their five pounds (B\$15) fee.

This action managed to produce more members, although, as expected, it did not reach the thousand produced before by Mrs. X. Mrs. X no longer work with BASE, as she did not turn up for the elections during the Annual General Meeting. Her approach was a reminiscent of the William Tyndale affair (Riley, 1998) in which actions were not clearly communicated to others.

BASE, being a non-profit association, has always been careful about spending money, particularly with unbudgeted items. Since there was no funding for the card-printing machine, I proposed to the EXCO that over the long term, if at least two hundred student applications were made each year, the value of the asset would be replaced in at most four years' time. The card-printing machine will only be used seasonally, that is, during BASE events, which happen at least three times a year. In terms of maintenance, BASE should not have difficulties since the card-printing machine was purchased from a local company. I also took the opportunity to affiliate the company with BASE to enable BASE to get a discounted price when purchasing their products or services.

How feasible is it to purchase a non-funded item?

It is imperative to conceptualize any proposal made in order to make it coherent to the collegiate group. This is not an easy task as it concerns financial matters. However, this is where the Honorary Treasurer's balance sheet becomes a focus for determining how much money can be spent on marginal expenses.

BASE at that time fortunately had three thousand pounds (B\$10,000) from the previous event. This was one of the strengths that allowed me to take the risk of pursuing the idea apart from realizing its appropriateness to the strategic goals. The attraction it will have for BASE clients as well as the network

established with commercial agencies were the factors influencing collegiate acceptance, especially when the members of BASE EXCO were given free discount cards as a reward for their hard work. The approach was structured in Fig 2, simulating the input-process-output-outcome approach.

How does the discount card relate to the strategic goals and programme implemented?

With reference to the first strategic goal, marketing BASE via establishing self-printed discount cards would encourage more memberships from local graduates, especially newly qualified teachers, enabling them to purchase teaching materials at discounted prices. As there will be more professional memberships, this improves self-funding.

Regarding the second strategic goal, with more professional and student memberships, more specific activities can be organized at minimum charge, for example, in the BASE Science-Realization Programme, where members may join the electronic workshop conducted fortnightly. The workshop would again help to increase self-funding. Apart from these benefits, members have priority in joining the BASE volunteer programme, which has the further benefits of free T-shirts, caps, meals and access to the rest area. These self-funding activities definitely conform to the third strategic goal.

It is important to store the printing machine in an appropriate place; therefore the fourth strategic goal becomes involved. I managed to get support from the Patron of BASE (the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education) soon after I was elected as the President and obtained funding of 12,000 pounds (B\$40,000) from BSP Company to establish a permanent venue next to our temporary office. The venue, however, must be shared with other active professional VNPOs. BASE had to agree with this decision since BSP is willing to fund such an amount. In the light of implementing member activities, finding a venue became a strong reason influencing the Patron's decision. As for the fifth strategic goal, obviously BASE is creating networks with commercial establishments as well as its clients, who provide links to various agencies including parents who will pay student memberships. Such networking will then help to stabilize BASE to serve its purpose in promoting Science and Technology in collaborating with various agencies.

Conclusion

In a team, the experience of managing has not been as scary as expected; positions taken, however, must be firm and effective. In the long term, it is imperative to take proper management courses such as I am currently undertaking.

A clear approach should be followed to influence positive argument in the collegiate group; the approach should be related to the strategic goals and, more importantly, be feasible in terms of financial stability. It is necessary to get feedback from clients in order to make further improvements in the steps one takes, and to accept criticism in order to develop further.

Making changes is not a simple action, as it can cause explosive reactions. It is therefore important to seek a strong cause prior to implementing changes and to predict the future implications to be pursued with a purpose.

It is probably not a coincidence that most of the heads of the good schools in Brunei Darussalam were products of BASE. They were part of the BASE collegiate group during their involvement and BASE presumably helped them in developing personally and professionally, as it has done for me. Therefore, the comment made by the former General Director was indeed true. She herself was one of the BASE collegiate group who was appointed to be the head of an elite school and eventually progressed to be one of the directors in the education ministry. Managing a voluntary organization, I suggest, is a prerequisite to managing an institution.

I believe I am a leader of the *contingency approach* type, therefore I act and response to circumstances. As a leader, the right attitude should be practised at the right time. Marketing and managing change were two areas that I had to pursue as the new leader of a voluntary organization. Careful considerations and risks had to be contemplated to achieve progress. The experience gained has taught me well how to be a manager; however, knowledge will further improve and guide me in being an effective manager.

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Figures Used



FRONT FACE



BACK FACE

Fig.1 The front and back faces of the BASE membership card.

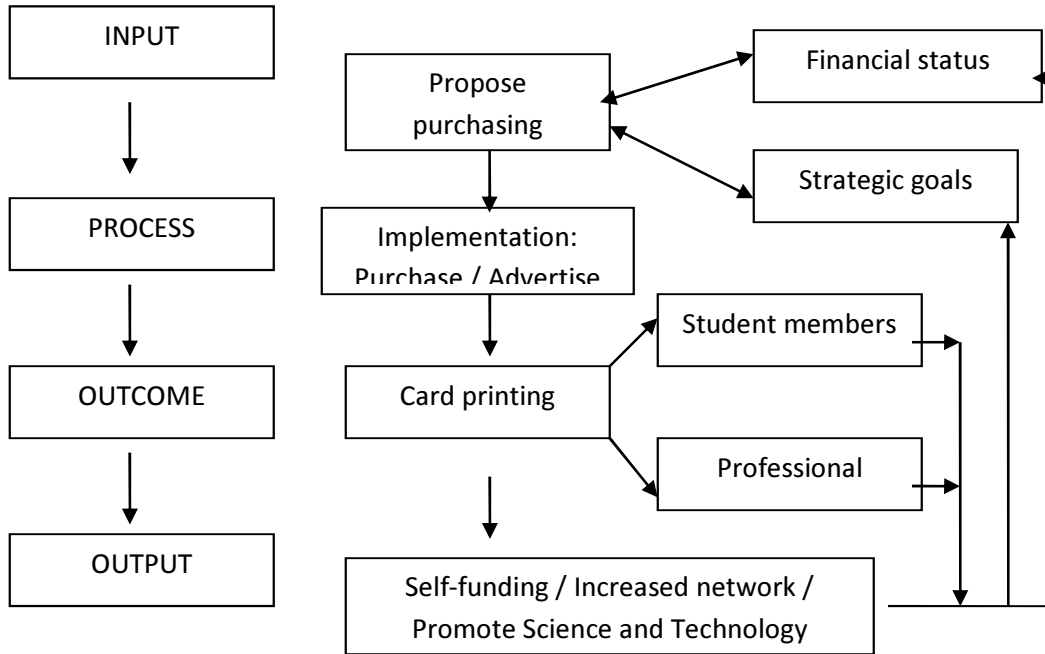


Fig.2 Structural approach to purchasing

Appendices

Appendix 1: Strategic Goals of BASE

The strategic goals were as follows:

1. Strengthening Members' Capabilities:
 - By: 1) Organizing Seminar, Workshop and Visits for Members
 - 2) Improving Communication among Members
 - 3) Encouraging More Local Graduates to Join BASE
 - 4) Recognising Members' Participation and Contribution
2. Enhancement of Science and Technology Education:
 - By: 1) Organising more activities for teachers and students
 - 2) Assessing and evaluating quality and effectiveness of activities
 - 3) Seeking professional advice and assistance from various agencies
 - 4) Conducting continual monitoring to participants in BASE projects.
3. Adequately financed:
 - By: 1) Developing income-generating activities
 - 2) Organising fund-raising programmes
 - 3) Acquiring and maintaining sponsorships
4. Establishment of a Permanent Venue
 - By: 1) Collaboration with STEP Center in the provision of access for

- Science and Technology information
- 2) Provision of a One-Stop Venue for Science and Technology resources
- 5. Intensified Network and Partnerships
 - By: 1) Maximising avenues for linkages with other associations
 - 2) Strengthening collaboration with Government and Non-Government agencies

Appendix 2: Letter from BASE Secretary

This is in reply to the Opinion of Mrs. 7418.

Firstly, I would like to apologise on behalf of the association regarding the long delay in issuing the membership cards to you and other members.

The delay is due to technical difficulties experienced by the card making company which is situated abroad.

Being a voluntary body with a very limited workforce, we have prepared a number of alternatives to remedy your blues, as we do not want to dissatisfy our members.

However, we would like to inform you that even without a discount card, members are invited to take part in our relevant activities at minimal or no charge at all.

I am therefore inviting you to communicate openly with me by writing to our current email address basesec@yahoo.com.

- BASE Secretary