Challenges and Opportunities in Leading a Multidisciplinary Team of Professionals from Multiple Institutions: Lessons from AHI Lushoto

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Abstract

Forging strategic partnership to address the complex natural resource management issues in the highlands of Eastern Africa is one of the cornerstones of the AHI approaches in mitigating natural resources degradation. Such partnership brings together professionals from different institutions with different training, interest and experience. Apart from the highly specialized nature of the professionals, they are also charged with different tasks as dictated by the mandates of their institutions. The management of such teams brings about organizational challenges that require effective leadership in order to exploit the capacities existing in our institutions. In a study involving African Highland Initiative (AHI) site coordinators from Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania leading multi-disciplinary teams of professionals from different institutions it was established that this is a challenging task requiring patience, commitment and vision. As the team sets to work there is an overall lack of enthusiasm and an element of fear for the unknown. Several questions are raised in the areas of motivation, rewarding system for a group product and loss of professional identity in their areas of specialization. With time however, these fears subside for those who persist and leadership becomes more interesting and less challenging. It is concluded that there is a need for cultural change in our institutions as well as the professionals to accommodate the increasing needs for teamwork in addressing the complex natural resource management issues for improved systems productivity in the highlands of East Africa.

Introduction

There is a growing consensus on the need to experiment with new ways of working with local communities in efforts to improve the management of natural resources for environmental sustainability and improvement of the livelihoods of the people. Multidisciplinary teamwork where different professionals from different institutions come together to address common issues is one of these new ways of working that has been adopted by AHI. This was necessitated by the reality that NRM issues confronting highland farmers in Eastern Africa require broad based solutions that goes beyond biophysical technologies to social, economic, policy and institutional factors. There is no single discipline or institution that is equipped enough to handle this. The need to team up between different disciplines and institutions poses a significant challenge to leadership. Having a multi-disciplinary team is one thing but working together to effectively address a common issue is quite another. Putting people together in groups representing many disciplines does not necessarily guarantee development of shared understanding (Clark, 1993). Mitchley (2004) echoes this by pointing out that multidisciplinary team approach does not necessarily include integration.

To exploit synergies and provide holistic outcomes therefore, multidisciplinary teams must adopt an interdisciplinary working model that ensures different disciplines and institutions do not only come together but also work together to attain the required cross-fertilization. Drivers for successful multi-disciplinary teamwork include personal commitment, clarity of roles and having in place a common goal and a group of people with vision to take the others through (Wilson et al. 1996; Pirrie et al. 1998) and mutual understanding between professionals.

The presence of an efficient leadership that minimize the barriers to working together by facilitating exchange, mutual understanding and acceptance among team members (Mitchley, 2004) is therefore of paramount

importance. The emphasis in teamwork is on working together to deliver an integrated service to end users (Wilson and Pirrie 1999) and leadership must see to it that this is achieved.

Among the challenges a multi-disciplinary team leader should expect is to have to cope with team members who are reluctant to learn or accept other members' disciplines, tendency of scientists to pursue questions that are of interest in their own disciplines (Bawa and Lele, 2004), logistics (Pirrie et al. 1998), attitude of team members and limited institutional support to some of the team members. Teams exist within an institutional framework and the degree to which different professionals enjoy support from their institutions differ considerably (Pirrie et al. 1998). Some institutions vaguely support multi-disciplinarity while in others, team members are not sure of the support from their institution. Other institutional bottlenecks include the lack of an incentive scheme that recognizes and reward team product. Multi-disciplinary teamwork takes time but eventually yields good results as long as the rules of the game are honestly adhered to. Team members must be fully involved from planning to implementation and in sharing the products of the work.

In this paper the experience of coordinators in leading multidisciplinary teams of professionals from different institutions was studied in three sites in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. Information was collected through individual and informal interviews of site and former national co-ordinators. The objectives were to document the challenges in leading multi-disciplinary team of professionals and to identify opportunities that can be exploited to ensure effective team leadership. The study is justified by the fact that we lack information on and experience in leading multi-disciplinary teams from different institutions. Information from this work will contribute to the perfection of better strategies for the management of multi-disciplinary teams from different institutions for improved performance.

Methodology

Formal and informal individual interviews of site and national coordinators from Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania were conducted through e-mail communication and face-to-face talks. Two (2) sites in Ginchi and Areka in Ethiopia, 1 site in Kenya (Kakamega) and 1 site in Tanzania (Lushoto) were covered in this survey. Respondents were requested to critically look into and narrate challenges they faced during their terms as leaders of multi-disciplinary team of professionals from different institutions. The position of national coordinator was abolished in the current (Third) phase of AHI (2002 – 2004). The coordinators interviewed included those currently holding their positions and those who have left for other duties, studies or on account of positions becoming redundant. They were also requested to indicate the major lessons learned and give recommendations for improved team leadership. Information collected was synthesized and results summarized.

Results

In all the sites studied the imbalance in skills and experience among team members was cited as one of the major challenges to leadership. Coordinators faced the challenges of bringing team members to the some level of understanding of project approaches. Most scientists were new to the approach and they could not see how quality data within their disciplines can be obtained from a multi-disciplinary research work. In Ethiopia for example, researchers preferred to keep to their disciplinary identity first and integration with other disciplines later. In extreme cases some researchers never believed in multi-disciplinary research at the beginning and pulled out of the team (Tanzania) to stick to the conventional ways of doing research. Few in this category who remained in the team were not flexible enough to accommodate ideas and experiences from their colleagues although later, this changed. Coupled with this, was the lack of respect to other disciplines and researchers adhering to research quality at the expense of overlooking farmers' indigenous knowledge and experience. These differences among the researches were a big challenge to coordination. As noted above, there have been changes in various attributes with time as shown in Figure 1 for the Lushoto site. From the figure, interpersonal antagonism between team members and antagonism between AHI activities and other activities has decreased as team members and institutions understand and accept albeit gradually, the positive contribution of AHI.

Meanwhile, experience in skills of team members, acceptance of multidisciplinary (MD) team work, leadership competence and internalization of the AHI approach has increased although the later at a slow pace.

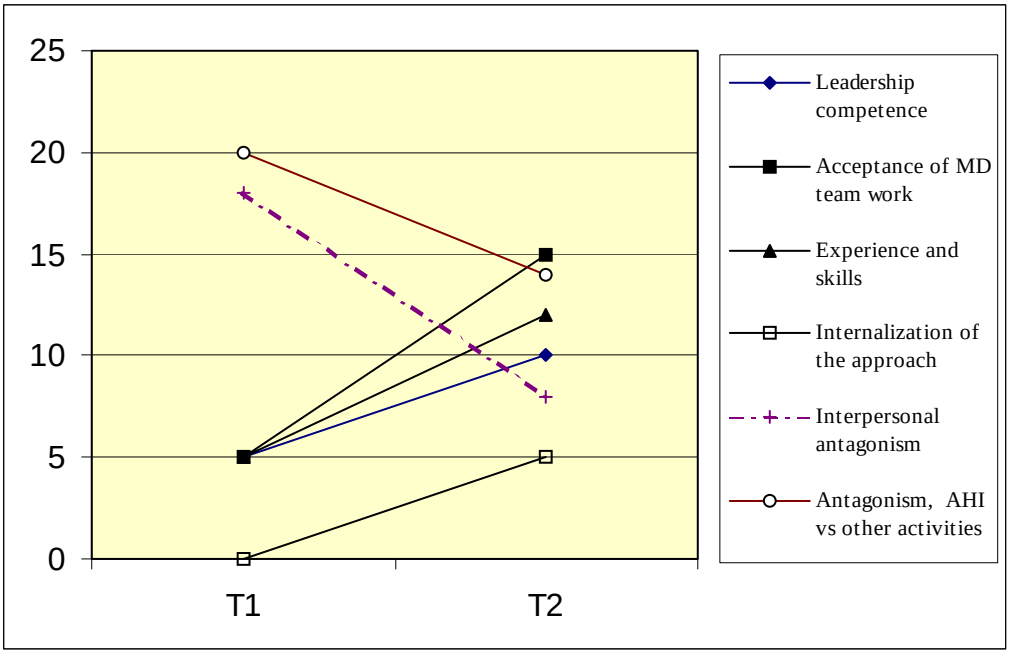

Figure 1. Changes in various attributes with time at the Lushoto site, Tanzania.

Common in all sites was the imbalance of the disciplines with more dominance of biophysical sciences compared to social sciences. The former have limited understanding of social science research methods. This affected the teams especially in conceptualizing Phase III of AHI, which is more on methodologies and approaches at watershed level than technology development. Emphasis is more on social sciences including community mobilization, policy, bylaws and institutional factors for enhancing INRM. In Kenya and Ethiopia the absence of memorandum of understanding is cause in leadership hurdles because of lack of clear-cut roles and responsibilities of participating institutions and researches. Some heads of institutions are not clear on the project objectives and activities and these are not even incorporated in their annual institutional plans. This makes it difficult for sites to get contribution form some experts in some institutions. There is lack of terms of reference for participating researchers making them less committed to AHI activities. Their institutional heads does not critically follow them up and they are they not even evaluated based on their contribution to project.

Consequently, some team members have not internalized the AHI activities as an integral part of their programs. Because AHI activities are considered secondary this had led to poor participation in project activities in some sites and slow pace of integration of the approach into the national R&D programs. It was noted also that the reward system based on individual (disciplinary) rather than team performance does not recognize the product of teamwork hence discouraging researchers. Coordinators have then to cope with demoralizing situations among team members. Most sites noted that the majority of team members are scientists with several other responsibilities in their institutions, others coordinating multiple projects. Apart form making it difficult for them to commit sufficient time to AHI activities it is also difficult for the coordinators to plan joint team engagements in the sites.

The differences in aspirations and attitude were pointed out in three of the sites studied as another challenge to coordination. The high turn over of team members, some going for further studies and others for other jobs disrupts project activities and calls for concerted efforts by coordinators and partner institutions to scout for replacement. In almost all sites studied replacement is a slow process. Different age groups have different aspirations; young scientists vying for further long-term studies (not accommodated by AHI) and the older and more experienced vying for increased remunerations hence better jobs. The coordinators have to cope with these challenges in trying to keep team members together despite of their differences. In most sites, participating scientists have higher expectations in terms of economic and educational gains which cannot he

met within the structure of the project leading to some members wishing not to participate or do so with divided commitment.

There is an overall failure to balance project goals with personal gains with some members comparing gains across projects and hence would favor to put more time in more rewarding projects. Finally, the universal reality of limited resources is another stress to coordinators especially when team members have to come from distant institutions (e.g. Tanzania). In some sites the lack of basic equipment including cameras has greatly affected the capture of important incidences for process documentation. Another problem is the late arrival of funds to sites partly caused by late submission of work plans or financial bureaucracies in the different countries. This leads to delays in implementing planned activities, disrupts plans of other activities and influence teamwork morale.

Discussion

Leadership is always a challenging task. Often, one is confronted with scarce resources in terms of manpower, funds and materials, which have to be used optimally to realize set goals. Naturally individuals in any organization are seldom homogenous and would differ in attitude, the way they receive things and react to situations, and in their aspirations. They also have different qualities they acquired in the struggle to acquire a career. This would be in knowledge, experience and skills. The extent of challenge to leadership will inevitable be influenced by the groups' heterogeneity. Good and effective leadership of multi-disciplinary teams can be considered a function of two factors namely the style of leadership and the attitude and commitment of team members to work together for a common goal. The extent to which coordinators are transparent and involve all team members in the whole process from planning to implementation of projects and in sharing the products of their work will greatly determine the groups' performance. In some sites, coordinators tend to concentrate most activities and decisions to their offices plus some few individuals around them while in other sites there is shared responsibility. The former has high potential to disrupt operations should the coordinator leave while in the later case any of the team members is prepared to take over powers should the position fall vacant. Further, there is less workload when the approach of shared responsibility is adopted and coordinators would not feel overloaded. Transparency is now a catchword in many organizations as one of the factors for improved performance. This allows team members to know what is taking place and contributes to making things work better, because they feel involved. Further to this, leadership must ensure that the roles and responsibilities of each team member are clear to and there should be frequent communication to keep members informed (Wilson, et al. 1996).

From the results AHI activities are yet to be fully considered as an integral part of the NARS to augment their efforts in delivering appropriate NRM options to farmers. The fact that some scientists and research managers consider AHI activities as non-core or secondary activities shows that internalization has not taken place. Experience from elsewhere (Pirrie, 1998) show that this problem is not unique to AHI. The problem could be due to lack of or limited sensitization of team members and research managers on the role AHI was designated to accomplish. Although at the onset NARIs agreed on collaboration there was no formal mechanism to ensure project activities would be part and parcel of the NARIs research programs and that the AHI approach would be internalized. This was a serious blow to efforts towards institutionalization of the AHI approach.

There is therefore a need to do more homework in sensitization of researchers and research managers on this. An important issue to be tackled would be to formalize through memorandum of understanding, the collaboration between the partners and establishing terms of reference for participating scientists so that each one knows their roles. Further, the rigid motivational system within most NARIs should be re-visited to allow some flexibility in rewarding a joint research product.

Heads of participating institutions should, in collaboration with the site coordinators, closely follow up the performance of their staff so that project activities are considered important in their career. Most NARIs motivates researchers using publications as one criteria and this workshop has given researchers a forum where they can share and discuss the products of their work, which is one of the motivations. However, publication based motivation is still dominated by single discipline products. To accommodate the new approaches to

NRM that is, teamwork involving different disciplines there is a need for concomitant changes in the reward system (Mitchley, 2004). As pointed out by Bawa and Lele (2004) there should be a social and cultural transformation of research enterprise through teaching and education and provision of incentives for people to do things differently.

Imbalance in knowledge and skills especially the significant shortage of social scientists should be addressed. Efforts towards imparting social science skills to biophysical researchers is a step in the night direction as this is an important factor in interdisciplinary work; to get know some aspects of the others disciplines and to be able to appreciate and develop respect far other peoples disciplines. Further, training of a new generation of researchers for multi-disciplinary teamwork should now impart skills on working in a team composed of different disciplines (Ramakrishnan, 2004).

Although there seem to be a lot of challenges to leadership, there is an emerging trend in most of the issues raised, of a future that will see less antagonism among team members and between AHI and NARI activities (Fig 1) and hence minimize burden to the leadership. In Figure 1 aspects like competence of leaders, experience and skills are increasing. The pace of internalization is slow while antagonism between AHI and NARI activities is decreasing.

Conclusion

It is concluded that leading a multi-disciplinary team of professionals from different institutions is a challenging task. However, this is more of a problem at the beginning. As team members get to know each other better and accept and appreciate each other's professional background the work becomes more satisfying, antagonism decreases and leadership becomes more interesting. Through teamwork one get to know more professionals and is exposed to more talents hence broadening their horizons and thus make one more competent in addressing the intricate issues in NRM. This also means an expansion in scope and opportunities in their careers. Emerging trend in some aspects such as experience and skills and teamwork spirit is encouraging. Internalization of the AHI approach is lagging behind leading to researchers and research managers to consider AHI activities as non-core or secondary to their normal activities. We therefore recommend the following:

- More sensitization of researchers and research managers using successful examples from the sites, on the role and importance of AHI in managing natural resources in highland ecosystems.
- Establish memorandum of understanding between partners and terms of reference for researchers.
- Articulate for recognition and reward of team product to motivate researchers in multi-disciplinary teams.
- Build and strengthen leadership capacities in the sites. Sites should opt for more transparent and joint leadership and devolution of power to lessen burden on coordinators while ensuring smooth succession.
- Establishing clear institutional arrangements to ensure internalization of the AHI approach. There should be strategic forums for sharing the successful cases in AHI. There should be increased advocacy and sensitization of the AHI approach to potential stakeholders and other institutions.

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