

Leadership Practices of Indy Hall's Co-Working Initiative

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Abstract

This document provides an analysis of leadership styles within the Philadelphia-based Indy Hall co-working initiative. These findings suggest increases of individual and collaborative leadership skills among Indy Hall's participants are a direct result of the workshare environment. This research also proposes that shared work environments like that of Indy Hall may elevate leadership roles for a multitude of industries and disciplines interacting with one another. Further research is needed to assess a more universal application of leadership development such as within business incubators through means of co-working spaces.

1. Introduction

Around the world, business incubators are becoming increasingly popular. The most promising start-up ventures are typically matched with compatible industry incubators which manage and seek to accelerate successful development through an array of business support resources and services. Indy Hall is not a business incubator. For the purpose of defining, at best one could argue that the co-working initiative is a leadership incubator.

This case study examines the co-existence of multiple leadership approaches within the underpinnings of the Indy Hall organization. In observing this eclectic entrepreneurial ecology, its dynamic is well represented by its ever-changing and growing interactions of its free-lance writers, designers, developers, scientists, small business owners, and alike. The purpose of this research was to assess the effectiveness of leadership enhancement among the members of Indy Hall by asking the following questions:

1. How can personal leadership and shared leadership grow within the structure of Indy Hall?
2. Can a shared-workspace environment nurture entrepreneurial leadership in a setting supportive of a multitude of industries and disciplines?
3. Can Indy Hall's organizational structure serve as a model for collaborative leadership practices among conventional business organizations?

Located in Philadelphia's Center City, Indy Hall was established in late 2006. The organization operates its work environment on openness, collaboration, community, sustainability and accessibility. Its administrative structure consists of its two founders: Alex Hillman and Geoff DiMasi and administrative assistant Parker Whitney. With over 100 members, Indy Hall produces year-round events, products, fundraisers, as well as ideas/inspiration. The budget for advertising includes maintenance of company website and word of mouth. The horizontal structure of the organization mixes members with varying degrees of backgrounds and experiences with a shared goal to find their passion and become accomplished. The cohesion among membership is strong and in many ways a product of upholding this simple set of core values.

2. Methodology

Research and data collection took place during March and April of 2010 and included leadership self-assessment of co-founder Alex Hillman. Two (2) individual interviews with Indy Hall members were also conducted as well as two (2) observations made of community events and one (1) visit of daily operations. Interview questions included the following:

1. What were your reasons for joining?

2. What was your opinion of the current state of the Indy Hall workshare environment?

- 3. How would you describe your personal leadership style (authoritative, collaborative, behind the scenes, heroic, etc)?*
- 4. How would you describe your personal leadership style at Indy Hall and was their any change good or bad after joining?*
- 5. How has your personal leadership style contributed to the accomplishment of your entrepreneurial goals? And the accomplishment of Indy Hall's Mission?*
- 6. Did you ever face conflict among colleagues? If so, how were they resolved?*

Four (4) types of leadership perspectives analyzed within the organization have been identified through interviews and observations and include: self, shared/collaborative, team, and entrepreneurial leadership perspectives. Presence of the theory of shared power arrangements were also identified in this research.

Self-leadership involves self-discipline and effective application of emotional intelligence in interacting with other members of the organization. More importantly, a comprehensive understanding of organizational needs exists, coupled with skill sets for completing the tasks necessary in meeting these needs. This perspective is very useful in the pursuit of self-management or empowerment goals. Successful self-leadership “can alleviate the need for close supervision, direction and control,” allowing for organizations to operate with fewer intermediary parties, producing a more productive team (Pearce and Conger, 11).

Shared and collaborative leadership emphasizes social interactions, mutual learning and common understandings for effective outcomes. Fletcher and Kaufer address the role of this leadership as a group phenomenon that asks of three shifts in relational interactions. First is the recognition that any visible authority on direction is “supported by a network of leadership practices distributed throughout the organization” (22). Second, shared and collaborative leadership focuses on social and relational interactions for determining direction. This approach is static as well as fluid and multidirectional. The process of shared leadership addresses the need for mutual learning and greater shared understanding before positive action is initiated (23).

Team leadership places an emphasis on problem solving. Burke et al. summarize this approach as team responses consisting of executing research, applying findings to problem solving, managing personnel and material resources. Through these stages, a course of action is next collectively decided on. The role of team leaders is to balance maintaining both person-focused and task-focused direction. Another critical component to team leadership is the ability to create a climate that encourages mutual performance monitoring, supportive behavior and adaptability. (Day et al.)

When organizations are oriented towards leadership and excellence, support for entrepreneurial initiatives can experience further growth and development of personnel (Crosby & Bryson). Entrepreneurial leaders have the capabilities to assess individuals' capacity to meet challenges, take responsibility for elements of uncertainty, as well as negotiating through internal and external obstacles and environments. This leadership process is also effective in methods of team-building where members develop high levels of commitment and capacity to accomplish tasks. (Gupta et al.)

3. Results

The continued growth and improvements to the Indy Hall organization observed were a responsibility not limited to the administrative staff of Co-Founders Alex Hillman, Geoff DiMasi, or Administrative Assistant Parker Whitney. The paying members who find utility in perusing entrepreneurial ventures in this collaborative environment shared a significant amount of that responsibility. The administrative component was focused on two goals: first by nurturing business and leadership skills for its members through hosting seminars and events, as well as striving to remove obstacles that may prevent members from taking on more responsibilities; and second, by pursuing more ambitious roles within the organization and their personal ventures.

Hillman, Whitney, as well as former Administrative Assistant/current member Dana Vachon were able to meet with me on separate dates over the months of March and April 2010, to discuss their leadership experiences at Indy Hall.

In conjunction with visiting the workshare space in Philadelphia's Old City during regular hours of operation, observations were made during two events. The Indy Hall Show and Tell, allows members the opportunity to present their current endeavors in an informal presentation. The idea is to encourage the exchange of questions and feedback throughout each showcase. The second event, the Indy Hall New Member Lunch, was part of weekly event that takes place on Friday afternoons. New members not only meet and greet with veteran members but also ideas get exchanged among one another in an even more spontaneous environment than at the Show and Tell presentations.

INTERVIEWS

Alex Hillman, Co-Founder

Alex Hillman accredited much of Indy Hall's success to be owed to the concept of the workshare environment. He is proud to be in an executive position where he rarely exercises top-down authority or finds it necessary to tell members "no" when they offer ideas of their own for furthering the organization's success. In fact—provided they take lead in implementation, most do not even require his authorization. As the members participate without a sense of mandatory supervision, they feel increasingly empowered to make a contribution to the function of Indy Hall. "By not asking permission and just doing, builds a deeper level of trust" Hillman explains. The second critical aspect to the success of Indy Hall is the collective adherence to a simple but effective list of six (6) Core Values.

The first three (3) values; ***Collaboration***, ***Openness*** and ***Community*** are broad, providing overarching application to worksharing spaces. *Collaboration* requires more than trust, an emphasis on the organization to be aligned horizontally is crucial. In terms of ideas, strong incentives are in place to encourage *openness*. Indy Hall offers a unique opportunity to pitch ideas to all its members. Because of the diverse profile of the organization's members in terms of industries, ages, and backgrounds, each member is able to receive feedback from unique, multi-dimensional perspectives in return for sharing creativity and ideas. *Community* transcends the

importance of a physical workspace. Indy Hall came into fruition before any desks were purchased or any leases signed. The empowerment of members and the strengthening of entrepreneurial and creative skills occur because of the will of the Indy Hall community first; second is the office space amenities and networking infrastructure.

The more unique aspects of Indy Hall can be attributed to the latter three (3) goals; ***Accessibility, Sustainability, and Transparency***. The organization is committed to *accessibility* as it provides affordable office space in its prime Old City Philadelphia location. The Center City business district not only includes a high concentration of businesses but also great transit service both within the city as well as regionally. The organization also supports flexible hours including late night and weekend hours as well as providing conference room space for individual member's privacy and for meeting with respective clients. The value of *sustainability* falls into every aspect of Indy Hall function. Each member takes increasing responsibility within the organization because of a sense of having a stake in the organization. This dynamic "allows Indy Hall to be self sustaining in a more organic way" Hillman elaborates. Lastly, this organization is *transparent*. All members are privy to know the amount of earnings each receive on projects and ventures. When there are questions about aspects of the organization, a series of Indy Hall community meetings are held year-round called Town Hall Open Forums. At these forums all members have an opportunity to address good and bad points in front of one another.

Dana Vachon, Member

Dana Vachon began at Indy Hall as a part-time member in the fall of 2007, then became administrative assistant from December through June of 2008 before becoming a full-time member. She discovered the organization while commuting to Philadelphia to work on a project for her senior thesis. "I was interviewing artists in Philadelphia, and needed a place to work between meetings. When I finished school, Indy Hall had about 20 members. Alex and I were friends, and he knew I needed work, and Indy Hall needed a manager, so I moved to Philadelphia to manage the space" she explained.

As a member, Vachon summarized the workshare space as "a productive diverse environment, that's a little hectic sometimes, but always has something going on." She added "Indy Hall allowed for me to meet a unique network of people. I picked up some odd jobs doing customer support from some of the members, which eventually contributed to me being a full time independent. I know by my organizational skills, I helped allow Indy Hall to grow as smoothly as possible." When asking her to describe her personal leadership style she was quick to self assess herself as an "organized control freak" but over her time, she has learned more about the value of collaboration from her role within the organization. She has even developed the skills to let others work on tasks they know they are good at without feeling compelled to micromanage.

In asking Vachon how she was able to face and manage conflict in Indy Hall, she stated the following: "Sometimes people just wouldn't get along, but the organic nature of Indy Hall allows people to disagree and work in their own circles if need be. Sometimes it was just a case of someone misinterpreting Indy Hall as just being a workspace, and weren't willing to contribute to the greater community." She concluded by stressing that it ultimately is the

community that defines Indy Hall not the space itself, so in most cases conflict naturally worked itself out for the sake of the community.

Parker Whitney, Current Administrative, Prospective Member

Parker Whitney relocated to Philadelphia from Houston Texas to interview for Vachon's administrative assistant position. Whitney left a stable, well-paying job with his father's business to take a free, part-time internship position with Indy Hall. Having read about the organization and meeting Hillman, DiMasi and many of the members in person in a visit to Philadelphia, he saw opportunities that he could not imagine finding in Houston. By December of 2009, Whitney was hired full-time with the expectations that his role in Indy Hall would provide him with the necessary networks and ambition to become a member and soon pursue business ventures of his own.

Whitney's personal leadership already possessed strong emotional intelligence, as having a very introspective personality and majoring in psychology as an undergraduate. His initial leadership roles were essentially the only in Indy Hall to resemble top-down or authoritative. The parameter of this role was limited to the issues of membership billing and general manager of the workspace. Most often exercise of authoritative leadership was highly limited, having a well-maintained level of respect with the other members. In describing the current state of the organization, Whitney described the workshare environment to be a "well-oiled machine of a community."

Engaged in a side venture with one Indy Hall member, Whitney has already witnessed significant improvements to his own leadership capabilities. Having pitched an I-Phone gaming application to a gaming programming member, the two have recently made significant strides in a collaborative game design project. Before working for Indy Hall, Whitney lamented that he had never given enough thought to developing his ideas into a reality. His exposure to the many different free-lance and emerging businesses of this entrepreneurial community has taught him to rethink his ideas as possibilities requiring execution and now says "let's to it!" Whitney is also now taking lead on organizing an Indy Hall Gamer Start-Up group to meet monthly for the discussions and brainstorming.

The sense of having a fit within the community of Indy Hall Whitney adds "really motivates you to work harder and try out more ideas". He is grateful that conflicts are a minor issue of concern especially having never found the need to turn anyone away from seeking membership. He, Hillman and DiMassi have had to explain to others who are trying to start similar work environments that successful co-working space has to be created with the community's best interest in mind and not to get rich off of membership fees. A surplus is necessary for further investment in the community.

OBSERVATIONS

Indy Hall Show & Tell, *Community Event*

Over the lunch hour, this event featured two presenters, the designer of Newsburry, a digital newsletter management website for mass email distributions, and News Trust—an online interactive fact checker for global news publications. Both speakers addressed the how's and why's of their web-based services and followed their demonstration with questions to challenges they faced. Feedback from the audience came from a mix of members differing both in ages and experience as well as industries. The total number in attendance was nine (9).

Two (2) from the audience were interested in incorporating the Newsburry website service into their own ventures after viewing the presentation. Several others voiced deep interests in using the News Trust site for following controversial news stories in the future. More noteworthy was how both presenters found mutual applications for each other's work at the end of the Show and Tell.

At the start of the lunch hour, the audience participated in what was initially two separate presentations. By the close of the hour, they left one collaborative meeting involving the partnering of two online tools.

Indy Hall New Member Lunch, *Community Event*

At the nearby restaurant and bar where the Indy Hall co-working community first began (National Mechanics), Co-Founder Alex Hillman, Administrative Assistant Parker Whitney along with eleven (11) members met for lunch. Having only one new member in attendance was not of very big concern for the scheduled event. Part-time members sitting next to more regular members had the opportunity to catch up on their latest work with each other. In several instances individuals with memberships of one or two plus years were meeting for the first time.

The idea of the *power lunch* that continues to take place among some of society's most elite in communities all over, was suddenly becoming accessible for the general public at the National Mechanics Bar and Restaurant. New thoughts on strategies were exchanged, names traded, and the state of the Indy Hall organization addressed and reflected upon. Whitney, early on discussed the importance of the in-office chessboard for interoffice social interaction and networking. At National Mechanics five-to-six times as many chessboards worth of interaction were emerging.

4. Analysis

Findings from research results support evidence of Indy Hall's workshare environment as successful in nurturing leadership skills of more than one hundred (100) community members. Opportunities for leadership roles were distributed across the organization horizontally.

During the interview with Alex Hillman, a quote from Geoff DiMasi was shared: "The only reason to gain power is to give it away." Both Hillman and DiMasi were equally responsible for the welfare of Indy Hall. However, they designed a working environment that does not require their supervision over each member, nor to be physically present at all times. If changes, modifications or events are added to the ecology of Indy Hall, the members themselves must exercise an adequate degree of self leadership to determine which necessary tasks need follow-through for implementation. Dana Vachon's interview offers insight on the process by which those having only experience in authoritative personal leadership roles can adapt to collaborative situations where power is shared.

As Fletcher and Kaufer describe the shared/collaborative leadership approach is equally as static as it is multidirectional. Collaboration is more than a leadership role for Indy Hall—it's one of the six core values. Exposure among the different members in some instances spark collaborative executions among business ventures or creates new programs or groups within the umbrella of the organization. Thoughts and ideas at National Mechanics over the New Member Lunch, were passed to and from members as casually as the bottles of ketchup and saltshakers. Parker Whitney in his interview explained to me that his shared role on a video game application for the I-Phone took off over a round of beers with his colleague at an earlier lunch. It is also this shared leadership aspect of the organization that is the reason Hillman, DiMasi and Whitney continue to distance themselves from conflicts that may occur during the team building process. To date, resolutions are found naturally among members without the need for mediators (Gerzon). Whitney explains the reasons for this naturally occurring process may result from the fact that all of the members share the same core value of community. They have joined because they find a common fit among each other. The types of conflicts faced are reconcilable for these reasons and for the importance of their transparency (also a core value).

Hillman described how each member takes increasing responsibility within Indy Hall because of a sense of having a stake in the organization. The scheduled Indy Hall Show and Tell events demonstrate how important fostering team leadership within the organization can become with respects to problem solving and performance improving. As strengths and weaknesses of a member(s)' ideas are presented to the group, a collective decision is made in the best interest of adapting to obstacles and constraints.

The importance of entrepreneurial leadership development is also central to the core values of accessibility and sustainability of Indy Hall. The organization provides a multitude of avenues by which its members can develop the leadership skills that make their personal business venture sustainable. Hillman mentioned that ideas are only as good as they are followed through. Elements such as networking, generating a long-term direction, building commitment are just some of the ways sustainable business practices are learned. These principles also parallel the components of entrepreneurial leadership as described by Gupta et al.

By analyzing these four leadership roles, it is understood that Indy Hall does provide the groundwork for both personal and shared leadership to further develop among its members. It acts as a self selecting leadership incubator. Findings support the organization to nurture the skills of entrepreneurial leadership as applied through both training opportunities as well as adherence to the workshare list of core values. Its success is also testament by virtue of the diversity of industry's present among current membership. While co-working spaces do not have the same demands that larger companies face on a daily bases, the core values of Indy Hall are applicable in most aspects of traditional corporate businesses worldwide and may redefine the role that business incubators serve in start-up businesses. If anything less, the workshare environment can serve as a model for larger business to better assess their adaptability skills in the volatile global economy.

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