

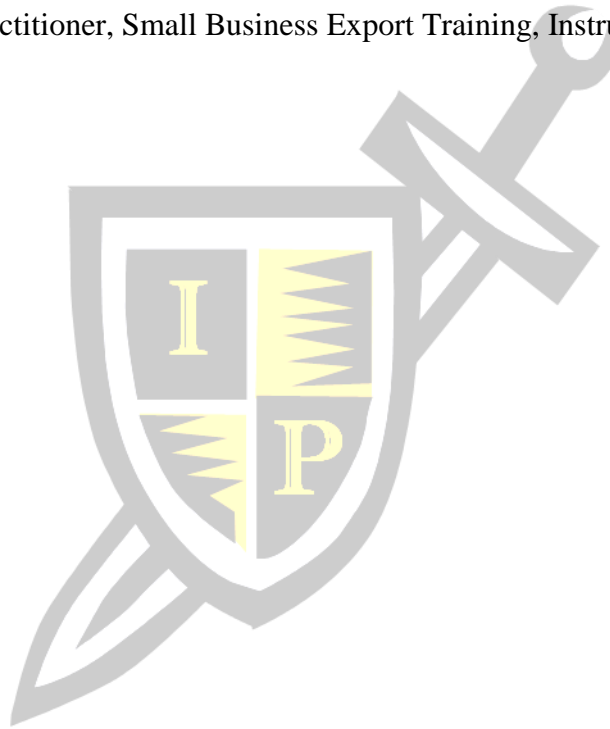
Bridging the scholar-practitioner gap: The San Antonio Export Leaders Program

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ABSTRACT

Bridging the gap between theory and practice enables trade service providers to effectively reach the small business community interested in entering foreign markets. This paper describes how the award-winning San Antonio Export Leaders program is a model for applying theoretical concepts to the practice of international business.

Keywords: Scholar-Practitioner, Small Business Export Training, Instructional Model



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According to Kurt Lewin (1951, p. 169), “There is nothing so practical as a good theory,” and one of his commitments was the integration of theory and practice. Both academics and practitioners have debated the viewpoints of “theory to practice” and “practice to theory” for years. Rich (2005) claimed that these viewpoints between research and practice have grown farther apart since the gap between scientific theory and applied research was noted by Simon (1976). For the scholar-practitioner, this is sometimes hard to understand because theories change and evolve, and often practice is far different than the scientific principle upon which a theory is based. Thus, the debate continues between academics and practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

The orientations between practitioners and academics are different. Most academics are likely to focus on pure research (i.e., developing theories, adding to the knowledge base, and testing theories). The practitioner frequently is required to solve a problem or meet a challenge in a relative short time span. However, some academics also apply their expertise to applied research and collaborate with practitioners. These individuals may be referred to as scholar-practitioners. On the other hand, practitioners want to apply appropriate theory (“theories-in-use”) to problem solving (Cornelissen, 2002), and these individuals may be referred to as practitioner-scholars. Some authors argue that the difference between practitioners and academics is an appropriate situation (Holbrook, 1985). Others believe that the differences can complement each other (Jacoby, 1985).

Theories are useful in explaining situations and in trying to solve problems. They “provide the basis for understanding relationships among variables and the consequences of alternative courses of action” (Cunningham & Weschler, 2002, p. 105). Hence, scholar-practitioners will use the understanding of relationships to help predict possible outcomes from real world data, and the results are beneficial to organizational leaders.

One approach to bridge the gap between scholars and practitioners, “activity theory” was suggested by Tenkasi & Hay (2004). They proposed that activity theory provides a framework for interpreting theory-practice linkages in organizational projects. Their discussion compared the linkage between theory and practice as being analogous to the linkage between knowledge and activity. They defined activity “as the engagement of a subject toward a certain goal or objective” (Tenkasi & Hay, p. 180). Thus, action learning could help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The purpose of this research is to present an example from the world of practice to demonstrate how the activity theory is applied. This paper suggests the San Antonio Export Leaders Program as a model to bridge this gap between academia and practice and further the understanding of how action learning works.

SAN ANTONIO EXPORT LEADERS PROGRAM

Ten years ago, a need existed in the international business arena to increase the number of small firms doing business with Mexico. Historically, San Antonio has strong ties with its neighbor to the south, and trade between Texas and Mexico has grown exponentially since the late 1980s, when Mexico joined the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade).

However, the small business community was still reluctant to take advantage of the many opportunities to do business in Mexico, even though the barriers to trade have been greatly

reduced since 1994 through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). For a variety of reasons, small businesses in San Antonio and across the United States, perceive international business as being too difficult. Small firms avoid the risks associated with getting their products across the border into a foreign country, and they believe the many myths associated with jumping into the international arena.

Some small businesses believe that one of the major reasons that they cannot compete in the international arena is that they are small; whereas in reality, more than 90 percent of the businesses who export are categorized as small businesses by the Small Business Administration. Many believe there is no financial assistance for exporting, when in fact there are programs offered by the federal government and many states to protect small businesses and help them export with little financial risk. Small businesses also may feel inadequate because they do not speak the language of the foreign country in which they could do business; in truth, one does not have to speak a foreign language to be a successful international business person. Indeed, it does help, but it is not absolutely required as there is much assistance available to overcome this barrier. The list goes on with many more excuses.

Trade Service Providers

The City of San Antonio realized the importance of this relationship with Mexico years ago, when it created the Casa San Antonio program. The first office of Casa San Antonio opened in Guadalajara in the State of Jalisco, Mexico in 1992, while NAFTA was still being negotiated. Up until 2010, San Antonio was the only city in the entire United States operating three full-time offices in Mexico – the other two offices were in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon and in Mexico City, D.F. – to assist business people from both countries in doing business with each other.

At the same time, in 1992, the South-West Texas Border International Trade Center (ITC) was created and began providing assistance to small businesses interested in entering global markets. The ITC is a specialty center which is part of the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) network covering all fifty U.S. states and territories.

These two organizations – the SBDC and the City of San Antonio – jointly took the lead to create the San Antonio Export Leaders Program (SAELP) in 1999, with the first class beginning in 2000. The purpose of the program was to fill two needs: to increase the number of small businesses exporting to Mexico, and to increase the use of existing resources, namely the Casa San Antonio offices in Mexico and the SBDC, through training and education, support, encouragement, and mentoring.

The San Antonio Export Leaders program originally required a ten-month commitment to attend seminars and intensive workshops to instruct and train the participants in the basics of international business. After approximately five months, the participants traveled to Mexico City to meet with potential business clients or partners. These meetings were arranged by the Casa San Antonio office in Mexico City, and each participant had a staff member from the ITC or Casa San Antonio with them during all the meetings.

The program provided many examples of overcoming the typical business person's resistance to university and government assistance (in the form of theory and/or knowledge) which resulted in millions of dollars of "action" in the form of export activity. The strength of the program has been the communication and development of trust among the participants and the service providers. The theorists or knowledge providers have been able to overcome the

participants' fear of the unknown by relating to the Export Leader practitioners through the activities of the program.

Developing Activities

Experiential training provided through the trade missions assisted the businesses to increase their self-confidence and overcome the fear of doing business in a foreign country. Further, the bilingual trade service providers facilitated the communication process between the business people from two different countries. They handled initial introductions, and ensured that misunderstandings due to language barriers were kept to a minimum. Near the end of the program, those businesses who had had successful meetings and who wanted to pursue further discussions with potential business clients, returned to Mexico City for a shorter visit, again coordinated by Casa San Antonio and the US Export Assistance Center.

In addition to the travel to Mexico and the monthly training sessions, each participant was assigned to a Trade Specialist from the ITC. Market research and feasibility studies were developed for each participant. In this relationship, again the scholar-practitioner gap needed to be bridged. Since the ITC was housed at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), there often was a feeling of disdain on the part of business people that the staff at the University didn't really know what was going on in the real world. Therefore, it was essential to establish a bridge between the University and the business community.

Action Learning Bridge

The consultant-type relationship with the ITC Trade Specialist was critical to the success of the Export Leaders Program because the academic research provided the foundation for the feasibility study and/or marketing plan for each participant. In this environment, the trade specialists performed as scholar-practitioners with "an ethical responsibility to bring to bear the weight of evidence from up-to-date, robust research in the consulting process" (Neubert, 2003, p. 25). Hence, in order to bridge the gap, the ITC trade specialists had to use their personal experience and communication skills to help the business people understand a foreign market and comprehend each step in the process of doing business in that foreign environment.

From its inception, the ITC was aware that business people wanted to deal with service providers with real world experience. Thus, one of the strengths of the ITC was that all of the staff was bilingual and was educated and trained in international business. In addition, all had business experience and could relate to and communicate well with the business community. These skills were essential to meet the needs of the participants and bridge the gap.

Program Improvements

Originally, the two sponsoring organizations needed to solve a problem; existing resources were utilized to increase the number of small businesses doing business across the border. The organizers were strong and effective in communicating the need for the program to the San Antonio City Council and the SBDC. In addition, the communication between the sponsors and participants resulted in condensing the 10-month program into six months and still being able to achieve the goals of the program.

The training was intensified and compressed into three or four days instead of one day a month for four or five months. The two trips to Mexico were expanded to include Monterrey and Guadalajara, with the participants choosing which city they visited. The first experiential trade mission to Mexico was scheduled earlier in the program to provide more time for research and analysis before the participants returned to Mexico to perhaps solidify relationships and sign contracts. The Export Leaders then felt more prepared to enter into agreements with the change in the structure of the program, and more of the City's resources were involved as well.

The trade service providers were able to tailor the educational presentations to prevent an overlap or repeat of information because there was not as much time between training sessions, and they had more time to assist the companies develop meaningful plans of action based on the research conducted at the ITC. This adaptation of the program made it easier to recruit participants, and the former class members of Export Leaders have become just what the creators intended. They now are the business leaders that mentor and encourage the new-to-export companies to participate because those who graduated in previous years can show that the efforts of the SAELP produced results.

The changes in behaviors and attitudes by the program graduates were corroborated by using qualitative data from exit and follow-up interviews with the individual participants. The trade service providers also evaluated the program by collecting the quantitative data to substantiate the impact on individual participants. Collecting pre- and-post action data helps assure the continued existence of the program and legitimizes the business activity in the eyes of academia (Tenkasi & Hay, p. 196-197).

CONCLUSION

The San Antonio Export Leaders Program has won two international awards because of its innovative nature and because it does bridge the gap between theory and practice. NASBITE International awarded the ITC and the City of San Antonio its first joint Program Excellence Award in 2002 and the International Economic Development Council (IED) honored the City with its Innovation Award in 2003. This recognition came because the program is replicable and involves multiple partners interested in expanding the capabilities of small businesses to compete in the global economy.

The model suggested by Tenkasi and Hay begins with a need to solve a problem. In this case, the needs were to increase the number of San Antonio businesses exporting to Mexico and to make use of the existing international business resources – the ITC and the offices of Casa San Antonio. The second stage of the model involves adding the theory and turning it into practice. A review of current literature and best practices provided a framework for combining the theory and practice related to action learning. By requesting initial funding and support for the program from the San Antonio City Council, and approval from the US Small Business Administration, the second step was achieved.

The program was established with a focus on deliverables – training and counseling, mentoring and coaching – by the various partners. This is the action step. This was enhanced by the travel to Mexico to apply the knowledge learned in the training and to work with actual potential clients. The Export Leaders participated in the program because they wanted to learn about doing business in Mexico. That knowledge was then converted into understanding and applied to actual business situations in Mexico. Hence, through the program activities the participants were able to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The fourth and final stage “highlights the realization of the theory-practice integration” (Tenkasi and Hay, p. 202). To implement the final stage of activity theory, the program was examined to determine what changes could be made to improve the results. Hence, the structural changes to the program itself were made because of suggestions made by the participants.

In fact, this activity theory is being used in practice in this model. The participants gained a greater understanding of best business practices and concepts through the program, but on the other hand, the sponsors of the Export Leaders Program gained knowledge from the practitioners. Ernest Wilson (2007) noted that government entities, universities and others were in need of gathering and employing knowledge. “Theory-practice linkages are a powerful way to apply knowledge to solve practical problems and develop new knowledge as a result of that practice” (Tenkasi & Hay, p. 203). Thus, this model provides an example of critical linkages between professional organizations, institutions, and universities which can be replicated.

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