

FEATURE

PUTTING THE “TEAM” IN TEAMWORK

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ABSTRACT: This papers deals with the concepts related to teams and teamwork. Different types of teams are discussed with special emphasis given to participative intervention teams. The importance of teams as an agent for synergy and collaboration benefits not only the organization but team members as well. Teams foster greater employee involvement--involved employees are empowered employees.

INTRODUCTION

Whenever a task requires the activities of more than one individual, teamwork is important. Teamwork suggests pulling together and as such requires social interaction. Nurick (1993) notes, “Since the discovery of the importance of social phenomena in the classic Hawthorne Studies, management theorist and practitioners have tried to improve group identity and cohesion in the workplace” (p. 22).

When the word teamwork is mentioned, many often think of sports. One of the most successful sports teams in recent years is the Chicago Bulls. The Bulls have Michael Jordan, one of the greatest basketball players to ever play the game. But even as great as his “Airness” is, the Bulls would not have been so successful during the decade of the 90s had it not been for the cooperative team effort of other key players and management.

Teams flourish when top management learns to “walk what they talk.” In this fast-changing global village, in order to achieve quality and peak performance, a team concept has emerged. The team concept is appropriate for both profit and nonprofit organizations since the underpinning rubrics and principles are the same even though the specifics of each system may differ.

Is the organizational culture ready for a team-based approach? If so, then the organization must be willing to grapple with questions such as:

1. Are the top executives willing to relinquish some of their control in favor of employee empowerment?
2. Is the organization willing to release employees from the hierarchical reporting relationships espoused by an organizational chart to a structure that promotes self-managed teams?
3. Will top executives seriously give their all out support and commitment for the teams to succeed for the sake of the overall system?
4. Will a team concept be a blessing or a burden to the organization?

WHY GO WITH TEAMS?

To secure a global competitive advantage, companies put much emphasis on greater productivity from a smaller number of employees. Teams have proven to be “more responsive to demands of a competitive market place than traditional hierarchies are” (Rees, 1991, p. 7).

Team building may be thought of as “combining and integrating the talents, skills and energy of individual employees to solve problems and accomplish goals and objectives that may be difficult or impossible to achieve by management or other individual efforts alone” (O’Connor & Erickson, 1996, p. 1). The underlying assumption of team building is “employees are capable of taking on much greater personal accountability and responsibility. With this in mind, many day-to-day decisions that historically have fallen to the owner or manager gradually evolve into a group process in which the staff or team assumes a more participatory role” (O’Connor & Erickson, 1996, p. 1).

Teams are made up of individuals with diverse skills and talents. Each team member has a clearly defined skill set that needs to be identified and measured against the skill sets of other team members. Companies that are committed to building a team recognize the value of bringing together a select group of employees to improve a particular aspect of their business. It is important to realize that “Personal agendas of team members must be balanced in favor of overall objectives” (Adams, Arquette, Deutscher, Felski, Jones, McCarthy, Perry, & Zaia, 1998, p. 103). Teams are flexible and can readily respond to the market situations or environments that are always shifting. Teams allow fellow employees to learn from each other. As a result, competence is lifted and one has a wider breadth of experience.

While teams are not the panacea for all organizations, they are important to help shape the organizational system that intends to survive in an incredibly fast-changing environment. Recognizably, however, teams may not be appropriate for all situations but are organizational ingredients that no manager/leader dares ignore. Success in any system depends upon putting in place the proper nuts and bolts which are needed to construct working teams within the organization. A team, after all, is actually the smallest unit of an organization which itself is also an organization by definition.

TEAM AND TEAMWORK DEFINED

Varied authorities have attempted to define a team. Some of the common characteristics in the definition of a team include: (a) more than one person, (b) an achievement of a common goal, and (c) coordination. A team involves the coordinated activities of two or more persons who are organized cooperatively for the attainment of a recognizable organizational goal(s) (Larson & LaFasto, 1989; Mosely, Megginson, & Pietri, 1989). Team work then “is the essence of teams where collaboration, cooperation and coordination among and within team members are effective. (Mosley, et al., p. 545). Building productive teams is not an easy task as it is the “process of taking a collection of individuals with different needs, background, and expertise and transforming them by various methods into an integrated, effective work unit” (Wilemon & Thamhain, cited in Nurick, 1993). “The best results are obtained when people work together with a sense of commitment to one another as well as to the organization. ‘Unity of purpose’ is the chief distinguishing feature of a team” (Andres, 1992, p. 6). This reflection was aptly displayed on sign boards in one of the malls in Manila, which noted that teamwork was “The fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results” and “the catalyst that yields excellence from shared strengths.”

A team may also be viewed as either a leader-directed or a self-managed micro-organization that is characterized with high camaraderie, communication, coordination, cooperation and collaboration in building up each member toward peak commitment and competence for organizational effectiveness/efficiency. There is, however, a downside to teamwork. Besides being time-consuming and costly and having divided responsibility, committees may reach decisions that are products of excessive compromise, logrolling, one-person, or a minority (Luthans, 1995). If a team becomes a political tool for top executives to exert their whims and fancies, then it is reduced to a "roboteam." A team can be equated with synergy. In the language of Kreitner (1992, p. 178), synergy is noted as "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" as $2 + 2 = 5$ or 6 or 7 or more. This implies that the effect of a winning team adds up to more than the sum of its parts or members. In harmony with this thought, Nelson (1997, p. 73) quotes the saying "None of us is as smart as all of us."

Even in a system that does not emphasize a team-based approach, a certain degree of teamwork is evident. This may be true between departments and among the various hierarchical levels such as the board, top management, middle management, supervisory management, and the nonmanagerial personnel. Due to the limited nature of this type of teamwork, however, the output is not the maximized nor commensurate to the efforts exerted or the resource employed. This limited yield is not convincing evidence of good stewardship.

TYPES OF TEAMS

In terms of direction, teams generally come in two categories, leader-directed and self-directed. Adams et. al., (1998) explain that the leader-directed team has the following characteristics: (a) the agenda is set by the leader, (b) the meeting is led by the leader, (c) tasks are delegated to team members, (d) members are usually hand-picked based on expertise by the leader from the various departments, and (e) the leader normally is an executive who heads a department or a senior manager from within a specific department. On the other hand, members in a self-directed team come from multiple areas of a system such as finance, development, operations, marketing, sales, administration and others. The self-directed team is usually made up of staff and line managers with varied skill levels and talents. The premise of self-directed teams is that the internal leadership will be the driving force. The involvement of senior management, while necessary, may not be required on a daily or even a weekly basis. Change, however, if it is to be successful, requires the commitment of senior management.

PARTICIPATIVE INTERVENTION

Teamwork has always been a big word in most organizations and is operationalized through the use of permanent or ad hoc groups. A popular group form that engenders teamwork is the participative intervention group. Participation allows workers an opportunity to be involved in decision making with respect to their own jobs. Participative intervention is a technique designed to give all employees an opportunity to contribute to the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization.. Three forms of participative intervention are quality circles, autonomous work groups, and total quality management teams.

Quality Circles

Quality circles are believed to have originated in Japan in the 1960s (Jarvis, 1998). A quality circle is a group of volunteer employees from a single department. The team members, usually number between six and nine people, meet to identify, study, and make recommendations which include solving problems and creative improvements (Fisher, Schoenfeldt, & Shaw, 1990).

Autonomous Work Group

Team members in the autonomous work group are given almost complete control for the production of goods or services. In order for such a group to function properly, “the company must develop very loose control systems, remove bureaucratic procedures, guarantee job security, and permit radical changes in the typical manager-subordinate relationship” (Fisher, Schoenfeldt, & Shaw, 1990, p. 391).

Total Quality Management

Total quality management (TQM) is a system that “ involves everyone in an organization and associated business process cooperating to furnish products and services that meet their customers’ needs and expectations” (Dale & Cooper, 1992, p. 19). Since TQM involves the whole system, it requires the commitment of top management if it is to be successful (Marshall, 1995). The four principles of TQM are (Fisher, Schoenfeldt, & Shaw, 1990):

1. Meet the customer’s requirements on time, the first time, and 100% of the time.
2. Strive to do error-free work.
3. Manage by prevention.
4. Measure the cost of quality.

Quality circles, autonomous work groups and TQM, all involve teamwork and participation. Each team member contributes to the upbuilding of the system. The emphasis is on collaboration and cooperation not competition.

FACIWERMENT

Empowerment and facilitation occur when management delegates authority to a person or a group, and then does his or her best to support these individuals in their efforts. It is like saying, “Please take care of this job and tell me how can I best help you.” “Faciwerment” is a coined word which is simply a combination of two skills: facilitation and empowerment. This is in line with the concept of Peel (1996) who describes the general approach to leadership as referring to the leadership styles which basically emerge as: Telling, Telling and selling, Consultation, Participation, and Empowerment with facilitation.

Facilitating Collaborative Teams

Thomas Gerrity (1995), dean of the Wharton School, notes that with heightened competition and rapid changes in the environment, rapid transformation is an option to the modern business

firm. The trend now tilts to more diversified organizations rather than vertical integrated structures. Teams are present throughout the hierarchies to remold the system. At Wharton, the business curriculum was designed to reflect the leading edge of management practice and education. As a result, cross-functional approaches and interdisciplinary perspectives are stressed for solving problems. The faculty members are organized into teams so that some collaborative teaching can be done in some core courses.

If an organization is to flourish in the 21st century, then quality collaborating teams are needed. Such teams will need to be more multi-hierarchical, inter-disciplinary, and cross-functional. Moreover, these teams must also be collaborating teams. Solo-flight managers will be forced to share their power with those at the bottom. Thus, the presence of "hero leaders" will become less and less until they eventually disappear.

One challenge that managers face is how to orchestrate the diverse talents from various professional orientations toward the task. Team members from different departments tend to speak their own language and may have differing points of view and loyalties (Nurick, 1993). Prejudice may prevail especially if there were departmental conflicts in the past. There are members who have multiple roles and need to report to different leaders. To develop cooperation within such groups the following elements need to be in place (Chaudron, 1995, p. 4):

1. Select the most appropriate team members in terms of expertise, political pull, and interpersonal skills.
2. Have a clear purpose and direction.
3. Each team member must have access to the movers and the shakers in their own functional department.
4. Team members must establish achievable and measurable performance standards for the group.
5. Understood and agreed-upon ground rules
6. Up-front team building training sessions.

It is of crucial importance that the members within a team as well as the teams within a system collaborate with each other. To create teams that value high collaboration is a must. Marshall (1995) notes that collaborative teams have the purpose of building ownership of operations as well as ensuring the members' alignment of the organizational direction. Foremost, top management must give its blessing and support to the team. Falling short of this may result in inefficiency and even ineffectiveness. Hence, tightening the organizational nuts and bolts needs to be done periodically otherwise the whole exercise could prove fruitless.

Empowerment

Empowerment is a practice that involves a sharing of power and is designed so that "individuals (or groups) are allowed to be responsible for making decisions about important things affecting them and their work" (Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, 1991, p. 235). The whole process of empowerment begins with a new paradigm based upon trust, respect, responsibility, commitment and competence. Where empowerment reigns, team members view their employers as more than just a paycheck and employers see those in their employ as more than just employees. If the senior executives sincerely understand the needs of their subordinates and seriously try to meet their needs, then they will solidly stand beside them. With reference to workers' needs, this may be dubbed as the triple "S" empowering-adverb formula:

Sincerely understand x *Seriously* meet/satisfy = *Solidly* stand.

Teams that are empowered become the building blocks of a truly empowered system. Empowerment is intended to bring about self-fulfillment and as a result high performance.

Empowerment is essentially internal— a creation from within the person. Both leaders and followers can mutually empower and influence each other. For after all, the real locus of organizational power resides in the people. Perhaps, this was in the mind of Drucker (cited in Zenger, 1997, p. 3) when he says, “Management has no power, management has only responsibility.”

Empowerment is based upon a trusting relationship. When a leader trusts his followers, trust is reciprocated. Trust is much like power. The more it is given away, the more it is returned (Tracy, 1990). Empowerment, then, opens up a vast horizon by releasing the unbelievably untapped energies and hidden potentials of individuals.

Hiring the right people and involving the right people in a system founded on mutual trust and respect fosters an environment where team work flourishes to produce the best organizational output. But it is not just the heart that is involved. The head and the hands as well as the holistic dimensions need to be underscored. This is quality “faciwerment” at its best. What you expect is what you get. If managers set high performance expectations and standards of the employees, the workers tend to perform better. This is called the “pygmalion effect.” Expect the best and get the best output. This type of manager-employee interaction carries a message of self-worth to the workers. The employees, after all, are the organization’s most important assets. Thus, a supportive climate where openness and trust abide tends to build rather than destroy the workers self-esteem. High expectations and supportive relationships, however, can be strengthened by participative intervention groups.

SUMMARY

Teamwork involves the entire organization. The team concept gives employees an opportunity to be involved in meaningful decision making. But if teams are to flourish, top management must be supportive of this concept. The diverse talents, backgrounds, and skills of team members makes it possible for them to accomplish far more collaboratively than would be possible if each worked independently. As a result, teamwork gives rise to an involved employee and an involved employee is an empowered employee.

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