People Skills: Change Management Tools—Leading Teams

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People Skills: Change Management Tools—Leading Teams

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This is the fourth in a series of columns about some of the most effective models, methods, and processes of organization development (OD), a discipline that offers much to the OR/MS practitioner determined to help clients solve real-world problems. Because it is based on a systemic view of organizations, OD includes the whole universe of fuzzy people issues that increasingly determine the success or failure of efforts to implement otherwise flawless technical solutions.

Key words: organizational studies: leadership; professional: OR/MS implementation.

Teams are important to the success of today's increasingly lateral organizations. As a result, knowing how to lead a team effectively is a vital skill for managers and professionals. In a previous column in this series (Levasseur 2004), I discussed the modern leadership model and how an OR/MS practitioner engaged in solving organizational problems might apply it. In this column, I discuss how to apply the modern leadership model in leading successful teams.

The Primary Choice—Leadership Style

The first and most important choice a team leader must make when preparing to lead a group is his or her leadership style. The choices range from autocratic to participative; that is, from top-down to collaborative decision making. The basis for this choice is the leader's belief about how to best motivate team members to get the job done—either by encouraging an individually focused, competitive dynamic or a group-focused, cooperative dynamic. The former supports an autocratic style; the latter supports a participative style. Fortunately, for those who prefer to complement their intuitive sense of what will work best with research findings, scientific evidence is available to help them make this crucial decision.

Many social science researchers have examined the impact of processes that induce cooperation in groups versus that of processes that instigate competition or create interpersonal conflict. An aggregate analysis (a meta-analysis) of over 500 such studies by Johnson and Johnson (1989) showed that cooperative processes are far superior to conflict-inducing, competitive processes in terms of group performance and member satisfaction.

Based on these findings, a team leader's choice is clear. A leader is more likely to succeed, all other things being equal, if he or she adopts a participative leadership style. Now, the question is, what is the best way to implement this leadership style in a team setting?

The Modern Leadership Model

The collaborative approach is inherent in the modern leadership model (Levasseur 2004). This three-part model encourages leaders (1) to work with the team members to develop a common or shared vision of the desired outcomes from the group's efforts, (2) to share responsibility with them for developing joint strategies and actions to achieve the common goals, and (3) to develop the team member's capabilities to achieve the vision. The results can be quite dramatic (Bradford and Cohen 1984, 1998).

Armed with the correct style (participative) and approach (the modern leadership model), we still need implementation details. The third question is simply, how do you do apply the collaborative

approach when leading a team? Modern meeting-management principles and practices provide some answers.

Managing Participative Meetings

Earlier, I described a five-step, systemic process for designing and managing participative meetings based on the modern leadership model. The five steps of the process (Levasseur 2000) are:

(1) Design a participative meeting;

(2) Agree on purpose, agenda, rules, and roles;

(3) Manage tasks and teamwork;

(4) Focus on action and energy; and

(5) Follow up on agreements.

Including team members in every step is the key to using this process effectively. At the beginning of a participative meeting, the team leader states the formal purpose of the meeting and its desired outcomes and facilitates a process for capturing the participants' desired outcomes. As a result, the group forges a common vision of the purpose of the meeting and, in effect, of the group's efforts.

In the third and fourth step, members of the group jointly identify and make plans for actions they feel are necessary to achieve the group's desired outcomes. The result of this joint problem-solving and decision-making process is a true sharing of responsibility, as required in stage two of the modern leadership model.

The team leader has an opportunity in the final step of the meeting-management process, which occurs after the meeting is over, to focus on developing the skills of the team members to perform at their best in support of the group effort.

The iterative nature of this participative meeting process creates an ongoing focus on the joint efforts of the team members to achieve these shared goals (that is, their common vision). The result is shared leadership in action.

Conclusion

Team leaders have to decide on a leadership style that will enable them to achieve their objectives. Scientific research and professional practice provide evidence of the benefit of an inclusive, participative style in encouraging groups to perform at their best and feel good about doing so. For OR/MS practitioners, opportunities to lead teams will increase, but only if they can embrace the concept and incorporate the methods of modern, participative leadership.

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