

# New Developments in Team Building

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Work teams today are being spoken of as the productivity breakthrough of the 1990s. The change represented by the use of work teams is often labelled as a "transformation" or the result of a "new paradigm". Whereas only 20 years ago work teams in the business environment were just being experimented with, a recent study by the American Productivity and Quality Center found that 80 per cent of the Fortune 1000 companies use some form of employee involvement programme, and 50 per cent of the respondents intend to increase the use of work teams[1].

In reality, teams have been around as long as man. They are not something that management has recently discovered and set into action. Take, for example, pre-historic man: if he had to kill a mammoth or do without supper, there was no time to draw up an organization chart, assign tasks, or delegate authority. Basically, the person who saw the mammoth from the farthest away was the Official Sighter, the one who ran the fastest was the Head Runner, whoever threw the most accurate spear was the Grand Marksman, and the person all the other's most respected and listened to was the Chief[1]. The spontaneity shown in this example is exactly the type of behaviour so desperately sought in today's environment.

But what exactly is a team? Characteristically, a team is defined as a small group of people who do similar work, voluntarily meet on a regular basis to identify and analyse causes of problems, recommend their solution to management and, where possible,

implement the solutions[2]. In other words, team participation is a collective idea power produced by employees taking responsibility for quality and productivity, managing their work, and developing their skills and knowledge about the organization and themselves. Such collective knowledge and resources will bring better decisions with greater support for implementation. As Ash explains, "People will support that which they help to create"(cited in [3]).

## History of Teams

As previously stated, teams have been around as long as man has been around. However, in businesses this is not the case. In fact, until recently work was being designed to alleviate the types of teams we view as so critical to today's business. In early US history we saw the development of the first crude productivity teams. The need was to manufacture muskets for the revolutionary army. Responding to that need, Whitney created an assembly-line work environment to help speed up production. This type of environment accomplished the goal beyond anyone's expectation and, therefore, remained popular until the turn of the century[4].

At this time, Frederick Taylor introduced "scientific management" in which he advocated the division of labour into small repetitive tasks that could be completed by basically unskilled workers. This concept was widely implemented because it meant that unskilled immigrants could be put to use in the industries with only minor training[4].

In the late 1950s Deming and Juran began to implement their statistical management ideas in which management attempts to find ways for hands-on workers to contribute to the overall quality concepts. The ideas did not receive a warm welcome in the USA but were eagerly accepted by the Japanese who were struggling to overcome a reputation for poor quality after the Second World War. An engineering professor at Tokyo University, Dr Ishikawa, helped to spread Deming's and Juran's ideas around Japan. The result was the establishment of 20 quality circles by mid-1961 which were specifically designed for hands-on workers to discuss quality problems and develop ways to correct the problems. The success of quality circles spread rapidly across the workforce of Japan, and as of 1988 there were one million quality circles with more than 10 million members throughout the country. Also, by 1988, Japan had become known for its superior quality of many products[5].

Even on seeing the successes in Japan, US manufacturers were slow to follow Japan's example. It was not until 1970 that quality circles appeared in the USA at a Lockheed manufacturing plant. Proctor and Gamble also began to experiment with teams in the early 1970s but remained close-mouthed about the results. It was not until a 1986 *Business Week* report[6] that any information became available. That article reported that P&G's team plants were 30-40 per cent more productive than the non-team plants. Other team-work pioneers such as

DEC, TRW and Commins Engine reported similar results[1].

### **The High-performance Team**

Most researchers agree that there are a few distinct qualities that set apart the high-performance teams. Although the wording may be different, the ideas are the same: high performance teams have participative leadership, shared responsibilities, definition of purpose, high communication, a focused future, focused tasks, creative talents, and rapid responses.

To illustrate with a common analogy, imagine two types of sports teams: a bowling team and a volleyball team. To many, a volleyball game is more interesting than a bowling match because of the team work. On a bowling team each team member is on his/her own to produce results. No assistance from a fellow team member can be accepted. The volleyball team, on the other hand, demonstrates all the characteristics of a high-performance team. Each member of a volleyball team is important and cannot function effectively on his/her own. Each member has the responsibility for covering his/her section of the court and also for assisting another team mate in their section as needed. Each member knows the rules and objectives of the game. Although each member has a speciality in terms of position played, all members must rotate through all positions on the court throughout the game. The action of the game is too fast-paced to rely on the coach to call the plays, so each player must react quickly to each situation as it arises. There is no time to consult management for approval[1].

### **Participative Leadership**

As management consultant Tom Peters explains, "The single most significant managerial productivity problem in the United States of America is managers who are out of touch with their people and out of touch with their customers" (cited in[3]).

There are many reasons why management tends to distance itself from employees. Some managers feel employee involvement will lead to a decreased need for managers, some

resent employee involvement because they have worked hard for their status and their ego tells them that they are better than the workers, and some feel threatened that if they work with the employees closely it will be discovered that the manager does not really know much more than the employee[3].

So how can management views be changed? First, management must be "untrained" in production line thinking, which sees the workers as robots doing only a repetitive task. In order to create the trust that will be needed for successful implementation of employee involvement, the managers must understand the workforce, know its needs, and begin to act as role models[3].

Management must also be trained to always have the employee involvement programme at the forefront. They must constantly refer to the programme so as to let the employees know that the programme is not a fad and that it not only has not been forgotten but also is a very important part of the overall success of the company[7]. Finally, management must be shown that empowering the people will lead to a greater feeling of shared responsibility and thus greater productivity.

### **Shared Responsibility**

The second attribute of a high-performance team is to develop the feeling that employees are just as responsible as managers for the performance of the team[8]. Often in an environment in which unions take part, there is an initial feeling that the employee involvement programmes are merely a ploy to entice more work from the employees, or that it is an attempt to put a wedge between the union and management. The easiest way to overcome a problem such as this is to involve the unions, employees and all levels of management as early as possible in the implementation of the programme[3]. Every aspect of the programme must be a team effort.

### **Definition of Purpose**

Team members need to understand why they have been gathered to form the team. This generally means that the team must believe that there is a problem with the status quo and that

they have volunteered to find another solution to the problem or to upgrade the system to form a new status quo. Team members should also understand that the purpose of the team is not only to fix a problem but also to have each individual as well as the team as a whole gain something from the process[9]. They are a part of the team to better themselves, to better the team, to better the other employees' work environment, and to better the company as a whole.

A prime example of the benefits of having team members who understand the purpose of the business is shown by Stew Leonard's Dairy in Connecticut. At this dairy, the purpose or philosophy is that the customer is always right. One day a distraught woman approached a young clerk. She was upset because she had lost a valuable pen somewhere in the dairy. "Instinctively" the clerk gave the woman \$60 in gift certificates to make up for her loss. Knowing that the average customer spends \$5,000 per year at the dairy, the clerk understood that the money would soon be recouped. As a result the store had a customer for life in the woman, and she would undoubtedly tell several friends of her experience[8].

### **High Communication**

Another key area in team building is communication. This communication should be from the top down, from the bottom up, and lateral. One common mistake in team development is to exclude upper management, assuming that the employees will not open up if the managers are present[1]. Contrary to their beliefs, by including management in the teams it is reinforcing the idea that all the team members are equal and that management is a part of the company's team. Having management on the teams will also help to ease apprehensions about management and will help to create an open, trusting atmosphere in which employees feel that management will listen to and handle a situation as it is occurring rather than only when necessary[8].

In describing the most important paths he took to help his company be successful, Huffy Bikes' president, John Mariotti, explains that the high communication at Huffy Bikes helped to build trust throughout the company. In talking with the employees he tells

the truth of the situation even if it is unpleasant. He states and restates the vision constantly. Most of all, he listens to the employees' input because they are the true experts[7]. Incidentally, Huffy Bikes is known for its superior quality.

### **Focused Future**

In order for a team to be successful, it must be able to see the changes it is pursuing as an opportunity for growth. As mentioned earlier, the team must have a feeling of dissatisfaction with the status quo. It should recognize what it is that it wants to change and have a clear understanding of the desired results of its efforts. In short, a team should know where it is at the present and where it is going in the future.

Another important aspect of team building is that the team must see a future in its work. If the team feels that management is supporting its efforts as a vehicle for a "quick-fix" of declining productivity, then the team will probably decide not to expend much effort on the task which they feel will eventually end up on the back-burner[10]. This again leads to the importance of full management support.

### **Focused Tasks**

Employee involvement teams ideally are made up of five to 15 members representing a cross-section of the areas within the organization being affected. Choosing those to participate on the team should not be random. To maximize interest and productivity, the results of the team's activities should directly relate to the team members' work[2]. Each team member must have a stake in the outcome resulting from the team's efforts.

Once the team has been empowered, it is important to encourage the team to focus on the task at hand. Some of the most focused teams are distributed teams. These are teams that are not physically located together. These teams communicate through computer networking, which provides several advantages. Since a distributed team has no face-to-face contact, there are seldom prejudgements about other team members based on looks or actions. Non-verbal aspects of the group's interactions are virtually eliminated, and verbal interactions are

severely limited because rambling is generally not tolerated[2].

Focused teams generally experience a greater self-worth at the end of the project. The team members grow both as a team and as individuals through team goals and successes. Focused teams also tend to feel that the general objectives and methods used were "right" and tend to support the results as if they were their own ideas (which, technically, they are)[11].

### **Creative Talents**

Being able to apply an individual's creativity and talents can reap tremendous rewards. The Monsanto Company in St Louis is an ideal example. In the early 1980s the computer chip company was facing a major reconstruction of its plant. The company had been successfully experimenting with employee motivation for a couple years and was intending to attempt the same results in the construction project.

The project staff first came up with a mission statement: "To create an atmosphere of open communication and achieve participation, so that we can better utilize the talents, skills, and inherent creativity of our people"[3]. They presented the mission statement to the union leaders and asked for their support, which was reluctantly granted on the condition that the union was kept informed of the progress.

The next step was to improve the work environment so that it would reflect the manager's commitment to fulfilling the ideals set out in the mission statement. They built nice temporary housing for the contractors with equal offices for all. They bought heated and air-conditioned trailers for the workers so they would have a nice place to rest and washup. Since safety glasses were mandatory, they bought the newest, most comfortable glasses available. Next the employees were asked to come up with a logo for the construction job. Their response was a logo with hands clasped overhead in a sign of triumph, elements of the American flag and the motto, "Craftsmen Helping America Maximize Productivity"(CHAMP).

The public and employee response was extraordinary. A survey conducted of employees showed that 96 per cent rated the facilities "excellent", two out of three said the facilities influenced

them to come to work (and thus greatly decreased the absenteeism problem), and three out of four said the facilities increased their productivity[3]. By improving the facilities they reinforced the fact the employees were valuable to the job.

Engineers consulted with the hands-on workers before drawings were finalized, which resulted in significantly less rework and significantly more mutual respect. In short, the people responded in a manner consistent with the way they were being treated. In the CHAMP example, when managers worked towards fulfilling their mission statement they unintentionally brought out the creativity and talents of the workers, which eventually resulted in the project being completed early and thousands of dollars under budget[3].

### **Rapid Response**

As a team, opportunities can be recognized and acted on quicker than if the team had to go through the normal bureaucratic channels. With only the team members and the team's advisors to consult, action can be taken sooner[12]. Also, rapid response means that several people working on the same project can complete it in a much quicker time frame. For example, Citizen's Gas originally had a suggestion programme administered by someone in the corporate office. At that time there was a 4 per cent participation rate and 21.8 per cent adoption rate. When the employee team took over the administration of the programme, it made a few simple changes such as focusing on small ideas, training the supervisors to help employees change unreasonable ideas into reasonable ideas, and responding to all suggestions within a week. After 21 months of the new programme, the employee participation rate rose to 64 per cent; and the adoption rate rose to 44.8 per cent[13]. The key to the success of the programme was listening to and responding quickly to the needs of the employee.

### **The Future of Teams**

As a result of the increased number of teams in the business environment, there will be an increased need to empower lower levels of individuals

and an increased need to reward innovation and creativity. International management teams will develop to address problems on a global level. Informality and flexibility will become commonplace. As a result of the decentralization that teams can help to achieve, middle managers will no longer be in the dictatorship roles but will need to transform into facilitators, counsellors, and co-ordinators who will be responsible for developing employee competence[2].

### Conclusion

Teams are not beneficial to all organizations. There must be a significant labour component. Some other obstacles that might be encountered are the wide variety of solutions that may arise to be discussed. This time-consuming aspect is seen as the biggest drawback in the use of teams. Another obstacle is that one individual may dominate the team and thus defeat the purpose. Also, some individuals may place the importance of winning an argument ahead of finding the proper solution[14]. However, the benefits definitely outweigh even these obstacles.

If teams can be used and developed to reflect the characteristics described above, they will "help to strengthen trust, mutual respect dedication and cohesiveness of the individuals involved"[3]. The variety of knowledge and information available to a team can bring about a greater number of possible approaches to a problem which will lead to a better quality of response. Working as a team to prepare solutions will lead to a greater understanding of the decision and also to a greater acceptance of the decision

since the employees themselves developed the solution.

Ricardo Semler of Semco S/A, a diversified Brazilian manufacturer, experienced a tremendous increase in the productivity of his manufacturing plants in recent years. In one interview he talked about how he increased the quality and productivity of his plants. He explained that a wonderful "revolutionary" new idea was the reason his employee involvement and teamwork programmes work so well. In his own words:

Think about it. Outside the factory, workers are men and women who elect governments, serve in the army, lead community projects, raise and educate families, and make decisions every day about the future...But the moment they walk into the factory, the company transforms them into adolescents. My radical notion is that we hire adults, and then we treat them like adults (cited in[1]).

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### Further Reading

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