Facilitating Effective Work Teams

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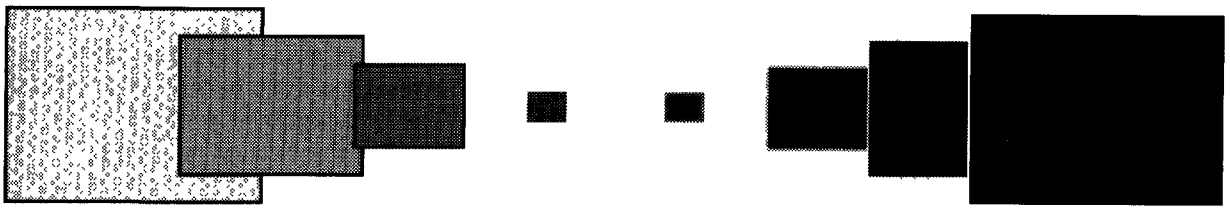

Introduction

Work teams have long been considered an effective device for enhancing organizational efficiency (Dyer, 1977). Since the discovery of the importance of social phenomena in the classic Hawthorne Studies (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939), management theorists and practitioners have tried to improve group identity and cohesion in the workplace. Indeed, much of the "human relations" movement that occurred in the decades following Hawthorne is based on a group concept. McGregor's (1960) Theory Y, for example, spelled out the criteria for an effective work group, and Likert (1961) called his highest form of management the "participative group" or System 4. In today's more complex and technologically sophisticated environment, the group has reemerged in importance in the form of project teams. The purpose of this discussion is to apply principles of interpersonal and group dynamics to create and manage successful project teams.

Team Building for Project Management

The project team is more or less a fixture in the current work environment. Technological complexity and specialization have increased the need for the greater flexibility provided by matrix organizational structures. Such structures, organized around a product or project, demonstrate greater adaptability to change and an emphasis on common goals. A major challenge for a manager in a project environment is melding the talents of diverse individuals with different professional orientations toward a larger task. Wilemon and Thamhain (1983:73) define team building as "the process of taking a collection of individuals with different needs, backgrounds, and expertise and transforming them by various methods into an integrated, effective work unit."

While the purpose of creating an effective team is clear, the *process* of developing a team is more difficult to determine. Effective project teams are characterized by both task and relationship factors (Thamhain, 1988). The task factors include timely performance within budget, concern for quality, and technical results, while the relationship issues center on the capacity to solve conflicts, trust, and communication effectiveness. Beckhard (1971) suggests that team leaders often place more emphasis on the task issues such as improving work and solving problems, while those who develop the teams (e.g., consultants) emphasize the group's inner workings and relationships among its members. As a consequence, the thrust of team development efforts depends on the viewpoint of those involved.

The technical aspects of team development are more clearly delineated, easier to measure, and thus more directly addressed. Hardaker and Ward (1987), for example, describe a technique used at IBM known as Process Quality Management (PQM) that focuses on understanding the mission, spelling out goals, and developing specific lists of activities directed toward critical success factors. While such exercises can be useful for understanding the task, they do not address some of the common misunderstandings that arise from the inner workings of multidisciplinary groups. Indeed, such barriers as differing priorities and interests, role conflicts, and power struggles can undermine the group process and quickly derail the task. Yet, these issues are the most difficult to see and require a leader with the necessary sensitivity to effectively confront them.

Common Problems of Work Teams

As functioning groups, project teams are subject to all of the phenomena known as group dynamics. In fact, because such teams are visible and focussed, they may be prone to even more of the common pitfalls that affect work groups. Project teams often take on a special significance and are accorded higher status and expectations of performance. Although groups can

bring more energy and perspective to a task, especially one characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity, the possibilities of malfunctions are great. A common myth is that the assembly of talented and committed individuals results in synergy and renders such a team impervious to many of the barriers to effective performance described next.

1. *Different points of view.* The purpose of a project team is to harness divergent skills and talents toward specific objectives. Coming from different departments or even organizations, there is a strong likelihood that team members will see the world from their own points of view. The tendency to stereotype and devalue other views is heightened when the project is highly technical and members speak their own codes and languages. If there is any history of conflict among organizational units, the representatives from these units may carry their prejudices into the team, potentially subverting attempts to create common objectives. Often these factors are not apparent until the team actually begins work.

2. *Role Conflict.* Project or matrix organizations are not only the product of ambiguity, they create ambiguity as well. Team members are in multiple roles and often report to different leaders, possibly creating conflicting loyalties. As "boundary role persons" (Adams, 1976), they often do not know which constituency to satisfy. The "home" group or department has a set of expectations, perhaps including certain benefits from representation on the team. Once it starts on the task, the team develops a life of its own with norms, values, and expectations that might vary from those of departments. For example, a department may be run in a mechanistic, hierarchical fashion while the project team may be more democratic and participatory. Team members might also experience time conflicts due to the demands of project meetings that compete with traditional job responsibilities. The pull of these conflicting forces can be either exhilarating or a source of tension for team members.

3. *Implicit Power Struggles.* While role conflict often occurs horizontally (i.e., across units), conflict can also occur vertically, because different authority levels are represented on the team. Individuals who occupy powerful positions elsewhere can try to recreate or exercise that influence in the group. Often such attempts to impose ideas or to exert leadership over the group are resisted, especially by others in similar positions. There can be subtle attempts to undermine potentially productive ideas with the implicit goal of "winning the day" rather than looking for what is best for the team. In addition, lower status individuals may be ignored, thus eliminating a potentially valuable resource.

An example of such power struggles occurred in a quality of work life project team in an engineering organization (Nurick, 1985). The team was set up as a collaborative employee-management group with the mission of improving the quality of work life in one division of a utility. The membership of this group was changed halfway through the project to include more top managers. When the managers came aboard, they continued in the role of manager rather than team member. Subsequently, the weekly meetings became more like typical staff meetings rather than creative problem solving sessions. Although there was considerable resistance, the differences were pushed under the table as the nonmanagers did not wish to confront their superiors. There was also considerable posturing by the top managers in an effort to demonstrate their influence, although none would directly attempt to take control of the group. While some struggle for power is inevitable in a diverse group, it can be managed in such a way to minimize potentially destructive consequences.

4. *Groupthink.* This behavior was identified by Irving Janis (1972) as a detriment to the decision-making process. Groupthink refers to the tendency for a highly cohesive group, especially one working on special projects, to develop a sense of detachment and elitism. To maintain cohesion, the group creates shared illusions of invulnerability and unanimity. There is a reluctance to examine different points of view, as these are seen as threats to the group's existence. As a result, group members may censor their opinions, and the group proceeds to rationalize the inherent quality and morality of its decisions. Janis (1972) uses examples from historical fiascos such as the Bay of Pigs to demonstrate how ineffective decisions can emerge from a seemingly elite and highly functioning team. Because project teams typically are labelled as special and often work under time pressure, they are particularly prone to groupthink.

Improving Team Performance

It is the premise of this discussion that the effectiveness of a project team depends heavily upon the members' interpersonal competence.

An examination of McGregor's (1960) and Likert's (1961) characteristics of effective work teams reveals that effective teams encourage free discussion, open disagreement, expression of feelings, mutual influence, and clear leadership (Dyer, 1977). While these attributes seem obvious manifestations of effective communication, they are not easy to achieve. This is partly due to the barriers listed above and the natural tendency to take these issues for granted or to assume that things will work out. Yet, these very factors often cause a team's demise. While there is no one way to guarantee the presence of these factors, organizations may consider these strategies:

- *Selection.* One way to assure team effectiveness is to use interpersonal skills as a criterion for selection. In many cases a team is assembled based on area of expertise. However, technical expertise does not ensure that a member can effectively transfer or receive knowledge. Effective team membership requires a tolerance of ambiguity and a willingness to see the world from the others' points of view.
- *Training in Interpersonal Skills.* Once the team is assembled, training in specific skills is important to help the team address its tasks. Team building requires a certain amount of coaching, perhaps from outside consultants. While there are varying arguments and designs for such developmental work (see Dyer, 1977 and Beckhard, 1971), the external attention can also help build some initial cohesion and motivation in the group. The focus of training should include, but not necessarily be limited to the following:
  - — Listening skills. Listening is one of the most crucial but often overlooked aspects of communicating. Project teams should focus on active listening skills such as paraphrasing ideas, reflecting implied meanings and feelings, and being sensitive to nonverbal behavior that can provide clues to hidden messages.
  - — Assertiveness skills. Finding a means of self expression is the other main component of interpersonal competence. Often individuals have ideas or feelings that go unexpressed either because of fear of others' reactions or because of group dynamics. Assertiveness implies stating ideas clearly, without unnecessary jargon and without the intent of "winning" a point at the expense of others.
  - — Conflict management. Conflict is not anathema to team performance; in fact, it may fuel the creativity necessary to complete the task. However, understanding the difference between constructive and destructive conflict is important. Conflict resolution is accomplished by a combination of listening and assertiveness skills in a collaborative atmosphere.
- *Appreciating the role of the leader.* Leadership is typically a confusing issue for project teams. If a project leader is assigned, the person will probably lack the usual formal authority with attendant rewards and punishments. The job requires skill in persuasion and influence, similar to a product manager in a matrix organization. If leadership is left to emerge naturally from the group, there is often considerable ambivalence about assuming the role, and any attempts at such ascendancy may be resisted by other team members. At the same time, the group needs a leader to avoid tumbling into chaos.

After examining a number of groups, Hackman (1990:496) concluded that leaders should be "unapologetic and insistent about exercising their authority about *direction* — the end states the team is to pursue — and about *outer limit constraints* on team behavior — the things the team must always do or never do." The means for performing the task should be left to the group. In other words, the leader establishes and manages the boundaries of the group, and the group retains its autonomy and freedom of movement within these boundaries. The absence of such a structure results in dysfunctional anxiety within the team that manifests itself in hidden agendas, power struggles, or withdrawal. Any of these takes energy away from the task, as the group becomes preoccupied and mired in its own process.

Another crucial leadership skill is to set the tone for the team. The leader can establish the necessary attitudes of empathy and acceptance that enable the group to function effectively. If the leader maintains the boundaries, interacts with the group's various support systems, and does become overly immersed in the group's process, he or she can monitor the discussion and encourage full participation. To the extent that the leader can create and foster an emotional

bond among the members, the group will continue to be motivated to perform as a team.

Conclusion

Facilitating an effective project team is a delicate balancing act between the technical and the social, the individual and the group, the group and the leader, and the group and its organizational constituency. This discussion has suggested that group dynamics and interpersonal phenomena determine the potential success or the ultimate demise of such group efforts. Organizations tend to focus on the technical factors when assembling such teams with the implied hope that the interpersonal issues will work themselves out. While this approach may succeed, it is prudent to recognize the more common roadblocks to group performance and to devise measures either to prevent or cope with them. Much depends on the careful selection and development of team members and the symbiotic relationship between the group and its leader. As project teams proliferate and increase in their scope and complexity, the interpersonal dimension will no doubt become even more crucial.

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