Optimising Team Building & Team Development

"Coming together is a beginning.
Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success."

~ Henry Ford

Introduction

High performing teams are critical to the success of any organisation. Teams bring together groups of people with diverse knowledge, skills and abilities, and have them work together towards a common goal. When working together, teams can achieve more than its individual members working alone.

However, simply putting a group of people together does not guarantee they will be able to work well as a team. In the following sections, we will explain several key factors that affect team synergy and performance, and how organisations can capitalise on this knowledge for Team Building and Development.

What Makes An Effective Team

Team Composition

Team Composition refers to the combined individual characteristics of a team's members, including their knowledge, skills and abilities, as well as personality traits. When building an effective team, it is important to select members who can make the best contributions to team performance.

Research has identified several key knowledge, skills and abilities that are critical to team performance. These knowledge, skills and abilities include conflict resolution, communication, goal-setting and planning. In 1999, researchers Stevens & Campion from Purdue University created a Teamwork Test to measure these identified teamwork skills. Using it on a sample of 142 employees from American production and manufacturing plants, the researchers found that those who scored higher on the Teamwork Test were rated more highly by supervisors and peers on measures of teamwork as well as overall performance.

Another study conducted by researchers Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, and Mount in 1998 found that cognitive ability and personality traits also have significant relationships with teamwork. Examining 51 manufacturing and assembly teams located in the US, they found that teams whose members scored higher on cognitive ability tests, as well as on the personality trait Conscientiousness, were rated more highly by supervisors with regards to their team performance. Furthermore, teams whose members scored higher on personality measures of Extraversion and Emotional Stability were judged by supervisors to function more effectively as a team overall.

High Performing Teams are usually comprised of diverse members who possess specific knowledge, skills, abilities and personality traits which benefit team effectiveness.

Finally, teams whose members have a wide variety of different underlying skills, knowledge and personality traits are more effective than those with little variety. Diversity in teams increases the amount of different knowledge, skills, and perspectives that they can call upon to help solve problems and complete their tasks, which in turn enhances team performance. In one meta-analysis study examining data from over 35 independent research papers on diversity in teams, teams that were diverse in terms of ability, knowledge and personality traits were more likely to perform better than teams that were not. This was true both when team performance was measured in terms of the quality of their work as well as overall team output.

Team Processes

Apart from Team Composition, the other critical factors which influence a team's performance are Team Processes. Team Processes come into play when the team is actively working together, and encompass aspects such as norms, communication, cohesion and role clarity.

Norms

Team Norms refer to informal and often unspoken rules teams adopt in order to regulate the behaviour of team members. Team Norms may be used by teams to control a wide variety of behaviours, such as team decision making, levels of productivity, and handling conflicts appropriately. In this way, Team Norms can guide team members towards more effective ways of handling problems and completing tasks.

For example, a study on 48 project groups from a management undergraduate course in the US found that teams with norms related to attention and awareness of time were more likely to coordinate and perform better as a group. Another study conducted with 176 work groups from a different US Business School found that norms relating to cooperation made it more likely that team members would help one another to achieve the team's goals.

Team Norms can be used to promote more effective problem solving and conflict management, which enhances team performance.

Communication

Having good Communication between team members is essential for teams. Teams must be able to communicate in clearly and effectively in order to assign tasks efficiently, as well as minimise conflicts and loss of productivity due to a lack of coordination.

One study on 80 work teams from 25 US corporate and government organisations found that high communication between team members generally led to better team performance than low communication. Notably, this finding held true regardless of whether communication was face-to-face or through online means, suggesting that communication between team members is important for performance regardless of the medium through which it takes place.

High Communication between team members is essential for teams to effectively coordinate tasks and ensure smooth performance.

Cohesion

High performing teams also have a strong sense of cohesion, which refers to the dedication and commitment of team members towards the team and its objectives. Highly cohesive teams are more stable and unified, which help them communicate more effectively and be invested in their tasks.

In a 2003 meta-analysis of 64 studies conducted by researchers Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, it was found that highly cohesive teams had better performance outcomes, and were more efficient and effective at functioning as a team. Furthermore, these relationships between cohesion and performance were stronger when the team's tasks required them to work closely together, compared to when the tasks could be completed by the team separately.

Members of a highly cohesive team are more committed and motivated to work together for the sake of accomplishing team tasks and common goals.

Role Clarity & Ambiguity

High performing teams usually have clearly defined roles for each team member, a concept known as Role Clarity. Assigning clear roles can help teams distribute work more efficiently and minimise potential confusion over where each member's responsibilities lie, which in turn ensures smooth functioning and good team performance.

On the other hand, team performance can also be affected when team roles are unclear, a state known as Role Ambiguity. Team members experiencing Role Ambiguity may question their contributions within the team or be unsure if they are acting appropriately, resulting in reduced team effectiveness and performance. Role Ambiguity may also lead to Role Conflict, whereby individuals unsure of their role within a team take on too many conflicting responsibilities, which may lead to tension and distress that ultimately lower the team's productivity.

In a study on team roles conducted by researchers Mumford, Van Iddekinge, Morgeson, and Campion in 2008, a "Team Role Test (TRT)" was administered to 82 members of production and maintenance teams working in the food industry. The test examined their understanding of 10 roles deemed important to team performance (Role Knowledge), as well as whether the roles were adequately fulfilled within their team (Role Performance). It was found that higher role knowledge and role performance significantly predicted better team performance, even when accounting for team tenure.

Clear understanding of team roles can help optimise team performance by reducing confusion about each member's tasks and responsibilities.

Team Building & Team Development

Within an organisational context, Team Building refers to the process of creating a new team while Team Development refers to the process of enhancing the performance of an existing team. This distinction is made because team members in an existing team have a shared history and working style which need to be considered when trying to improve team performance, unlike with newly formed teams which do not have any prior experience working together.

As such, when it comes to Team Development, a Team Diagnosis is usually conducted to identify any existing problems with the way the team members work together and relate to one another. Such issues could be conflicts in team members' expectations, lack of a unified goal or vision, and so forth. Once these main problems have been identified, the subsequent Team Development program can be tailored to address these issues.

The following sections explore a few possible ways organisations can apply the concepts covered in the previous section to create high performing teams. Furthermore, they will also explain how this application may differ between Team Building and Team Development due to the shared history existing teams possess.

Dealing with the shared history within an existing team is what distinguishes Team Development from Team Building.

Team Skills Training

One way to improve team performance is to teach team members key skills and competencies that are important for teamwork. Such skills include sharing information, managing conflicts, collaborative problem solving, and task coordination.

Team Skills Training may differ slightly if conducted for Team Development compared to Team Building. Unlike newly formed teams, teams which have been together for a long time would have formed many habits and routines in the way they interact with one another which may interfere with training.

For example, a team member may have formed a habit of not sharing enough information within his or her existing team. This habit may then make it more difficult to improve that team member's ability to share information effectively with that team through Team Skills Training. Due to this shared history within an existing team, it may therefore require more effort to conduct effective team skills training in Team Development compared to Team Building.

By increasing their individual team skills, team members will then be able to work more effectively together. Furthermore, team members will also be able to carry these team skills forward should they be placed in new teams for different projects.

Setting Common Goals

The second way that team performance can be improved is through setting clearly defined common goals for the team. In contrast to team skills training which focuses more on individual team members, the responsibility for setting common goals falls squarely on the team leader. When the members are unclear what team goals are, they usually look to the team leader for guidance and direction. The team leader must therefore have a clearly defined direction and set of goals that the team is to strive towards, as well as ensure that this vision is communicated to every member of the team.

Unlike with newly formed teams, team members in established teams may have developed misconceptions and confusion about the team's purpose and direction, especially if the team's shared goals were never established or clearly communicated beforehand. For example, some team members may believe that the team should be maximising profits, while others may believe the team should focus more on customer satisfaction. Mismatched goals can cause team members to pull in different directions, leading to problems with coordination, cohesion and communication.

When it comes to Team Development, it is necessary to clear up any prior misunderstandings and misconceptions about the team's shared goals the members of the established team may have. This contrasts with Team Building, where the newly formed team can clearly discuss and lay down their shared goals and vision from the start. This is an important difference to take note of when setting common goals for Team Development and Team Building.

Once every team member understands their specific mission and the direction they are heading, they are more likely to be united and committed to the team. Furthermore, they will also be able to coordinate and carry out their tasks more effectively, and be less confused about their responsibilities.

Establishing Working Norms

In addition to setting a common goal, the team leader should also work with the team to establish working norms that facilitate rather than hinder work processes. This may include how best to approach problem solving, better ways to communicate, as well as appropriate rules for engagement when handling conflicts. Leaders and teams may also adopt norms that have worked well for past teams they were a part of, so long as those norms contribute to team effectiveness.

Compared to newly formed teams, established teams would have already developed their own set of deeply ingrained team norms. While many of these could be helpful to team performance, others may be actively hindering the team from living up to its full potential. For example, a team may have developed a norm of openly criticising its members over mistakes in a non-constructive manner, which could dampen team morale and lower performance.

If an existing team has negative team norms in place, those norms would need to be unlearned and replaced with new, more positive team norms (e.g. correcting mistakes in a more constructive manner). These hindering norms would be identified during the Team Diagnosis stage of Team Development. When it comes to Team Building however, identification of negative team norms is not necessary, as a newly formed team would not have interacted with each other enough to have any team norms established.

With effective working norms in place, team members will have a set of unspoken guidelines to follow whenever there are problems or disputes, which will help improve team effectiveness and performance.

Promoting Role Clarity

The frustration and performance loss caused by Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict can be reduced through Role Clarity. This simply means ensuring that each team member has their roles and responsibilities in the team clearly outlined, and that they are comfortable with whatever tasks that are assigned to them.

Role Ambiguity is usually a more serious issue for established teams compared to new teams. This is because established teams would already have assigned roles to each member either directly or naturally over the course of their time working together. Role Ambiguity is likely to occur if the roles within an existing team are poorly defined or if they do not match team members' personality or skills, a problem that affects promoting Role Clarity for Team Development.

On the other hand, Role Ambiguity can be better managed during Team Building, since the team is starting afresh with no prior roles assigned. Before starting work, team members can take time to properly discuss and spell out which roles they will each take, as well as exactly what their responsibilities to the team entail. By promoting Role Clarity in this manner, there is less chance for Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict to set in.

In both cases, personality and team role assessments may be useful in determining which roles are the best fit for each team member. Using such assessments will not only ensure that each member's role is clearly defined, but also that they have roles best suited to their unique personality and skills.

When team members have Role Clarity, they will be able to focus on their tasks better, and be more satisfied and confident in their purpose within the team.

8

Developing Interpersonal Relationships

Finally, team performance can be improved through developing healthy interpersonal relationships within the team. Most team bonding activities have strengthening interpersonal relationships as one of the primary outcomes, and it may be useful to hold such events regularly.

Compared to new teams, established teams are more likely to have complex interpersonal conflicts and issues between its members. Teams whose members have grievances with one another are unlikely to work together well and may engage in infighting that lowers team performance. During the Team Diagnosis stage of Team Development, it is necessary to identify where these interpersonal conflicts lie, and to attempt to address them.

Strong interpersonal relationships help bind team members together, improving team cohesion, communication effectiveness, as well as cooperation. This will in turn have a positive effect on team functioning and performance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are a number of key factors organisations can focus on to improve team effectiveness through Team Building and Team Development. Improving critical teamwork skills, establishing working norms, promoting role clarity, and forging strong relationships are some possible ways that organisations can enhance team cohesion and communication, transforming ordinary groups of individuals into outstanding teams.

References

Abramis, D. J. (1994). Work role ambiguity, job satisfaction, and job performance: Meta-analyses and review. Psychological reports, 75(3_suppl), 1411-1433.

Barrick, M. R., Stewart, G. L., Neubert, M. J., & Mount, M. K. (1998). Relating member ability and personality to work-team processes and team effectiveness. Journal of applied psychology, 83(3), 377.

Beal, D. J., Cohen, R. R., Burke, M. J., & McLendon, C. L. (2003). Cohesion and performance in groups: A meta-analytic clarification of construct relations. Journal of applied psychology, 88(6), 989.

Horwitz, S. K., & Horwitz, I. B. (2007). The effects of team diversity on team outcomes: A meta-analytic review of team demography. *Journal of management*, 33(6), 987-1015.

Jackson, S. E., & Schuler, R. S. (1985). A meta-analysis and conceptual critique of research on role ambiguity and role conflict in work settings. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 36(1), 16-78.

Janicik, G. A., & Bartel, C. A. (2003). Talking about time: Effects of temporal planning and time awareness norms on group coordination and performance. Group Dynamics, 7(2), 122-134.

Landy, F. J., & Conte, J. M. (2016). *Work in the 21st century: An introduction to Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. John Wiley & Sons.

Mumford, T. V., Van Iddekinge, C. H., Morgeson, F. P., & Campion, M. A. (2008). The team role test: Development and validation of a team role knowledge situational judgment test. *Journal of applied psychology*, 93(2), 250.

Ng, K. Y., & Van Dyne, L. (2005). Antecedents and performance consequences of helping behavior in work groups: A multilevel analysis. Group & Organization Management, 30(5), 514-540.

Patrashkova-Volzdoska, R. R., McComb, S. A., Green, S. G., & Compton, W. D. (2003). Examining a curvilinear relationship between communication frequency and team performance in cross-functional project teams. IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management, 50(3), 262-269.

Stevens, M. J., & Campion, M. A. (1999). Staffing work teams: Development and validation of a selection test for teamwork settings. Journal of management, 25(2), 207-228.

Tubre, T. C., & Collins, J. M. (2000). Jackson and Schuler (1985) revisited: A meta-analysis of the relationships between role ambiguity, role conflict, and job performance. Journal of management, 26(1), 155-169.