Managing teams

Introduction

Teams can be an extremely effective method of getting things done; teams can also fail spectacularly. It should be remembered that there's more to building a team than putting together a group of people and calling them one.

Why teams?

Human beings are social animals. They live and work in communities of people. Upbringing is in small groups – families, classrooms, gangs – and people learn early to be comfortable in small groups. This helps them to develop commitment to a team, which they might not have to a large organisation. Ask people whom they work for and they'll give the company name. Ask them what they see in their mind's eye, and the chances are it will be their immediate manager or colleagues. People can lose sight of the big picture, especially in large organisations. It is their work "family" to whom they relate.

This social cohesion gives us strength. Many tasks are beyond individual human beings. Growth and development comes through interaction within groups, as does the completion of any major task. Groups also offer continuity. A group can continue work on a task when individuals leave or take a break.

This cohesion and continuity mean that well organised groups – teams – can improve productivity in the organisations in which they work by between eight and 11 per cent. Teams can also contribute to the improvement of working climate, because of the improved relationships that they should engender between employees.

The purpose of your team

There are a number of considerations with regard to whether relationship building amongst employees is appropriate or necessary. These can be offered in the form of indicators:

- The nature of the work: Teams tend to perform better when they are involved in carrying out tasks that have clear short- or medium-term objectives. Where the work can't be broken down in this way, teams can be destructive.

- The nature of the work environment: A "strong" management style where the team leader needs to "tell" people or where the leader is very influential may not assist in team development. Leadership in a small group may have very different characteristics to the generally accepted model of what a leader or manager does. If you are unhappy to relinquish power to the group, then team building may be inappropriate.

- The individuals in the team and the way in which they communicate: Teams do not need to be made up of similar individuals and diversity can be an advantage in developing high-performance teams. Where the work requires little communication between employees, there is little reason to develop teams.

- The nature of the environment: In an organisation that is structured by departments or where individuals concentrate on individual tasks with little relation between employees, it may be inappropriate to consider team building.

The sorts of processes that are involved

One of the more influential methods of looking at the way in which teams "work" involves the type of people who make up the team. These "types", or informal roles, have been classified and scales have been developed to identify them. One of the most popular of these was developed by Meredith Belbin[1], who identified a number of "traits" or characteristics in each potential team member, as follows:

- high intelligence vs. low intelligence;
- high dominance vs. low dominance;
- extroversion vs. introversion; and,
- stability vs. anxiety.

These traits combined with a number of secondary measures determine team "type" or role. Belbin identifies eight types or roles as being appropriate or useful in teamwork:

- Co-ordinator (Chairman) - Focuses on objectives; establishes the work roles and boundaries for other team members. Shows concern to use human resources effectively. Clarifies and sets agendas. Summarises and makes decisions when necessary - a good listener and communicator.
- Shaper - High nervous energy. Full of enthusiasm and drive. Continually looking for opportunities for action from ideas. Heavily involved in team's action and successes. The task leader of the group.
- Plant - The creative ideas person; tends to bring new insight and imagination to the group. Concerned with basics, not details. Tends to criticise. May withdraw if ideas are rejected.
- Monitor-evaluator - Objective and serious. Concerned with idea analysis rather than idea generation. May lack motivation, but skilled in analysis and decision making.
- Implementer - The practical organiser. Concerned with order and feasibility. Methodical, efficient and systematic. Does not respond well to innovation or lack of structure. Pragmatically focused; may be inflexible, but responds to direction.
- Resource investigator - Friendly and sociable; enthusiastic and positive. The member who goes outside the team to explore and obtain new ideas and information. Enthusiasm may fade quickly; tends to be stimulated by others.
- Team worker - Sensitive, aware of feelings and emotions in the group. Tends to weld the team together. A popular and supportive member; uncompetitive and dislikes friction. A good listener and communicator.
- Completer-finisher - Concerned with details and order, tends to worry over possible mistakes; communicates a permanent sense of urgency. May get bogged down in detail, losing sight of the main objective.

For Belbin, a balanced team needed to be made up of a full range of these roles and a missing role, or more than one person within the team occupying the same role, would weaken the team.

This approach involves managing relationships within the group by selecting compatible people, or people who occupy compatible roles. Whilst some research has shown this approach to be effective, roles are unstable. They will change, depending on the nature of the task and the environment. People can be shapers in one area and monitor-evaluators in other areas.

Task and maintenance

Douglas MacGregor carried out research into the characteristics of effective and ineffective teams by looking at the way in which they worked. He found that to

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[1] R. Meredith Belbin, "Management Teams – Why They Succeed or Fail", Heinemann, 1981.

create effective work groups, a number of different criteria need to be met. Broadly, these can be split into two types: the first of these he called "content", and the second, "process":

- "Content" is essentially concerned with "what" the team are doing – nature of task, needs for particular skills or information. When considering content issues for your team, it can also help to consider how these might impact on the team's motivation.
- "Process" needs are concerned with "how" the group works together. Process skills can be further divided into "task" and "maintenance" activities.

"Task" process activities are concerned with the way in which the group focuses on task and may include activities such as:

- initiating – putting ideas forward or starting new activities;
- asking – collecting information or views;
- giving – volunteering information and ideas, making suggestions;
- clarifying – helping interpret, asking for explanations;
- summarising – bringing ideas together; and,
- testing for agreement – checking on the readiness of the team to take action.

"Maintenance" process activities are involved with the way in which a team "holds together" in its work and may include activities such as:

- harmonising or smoothing – bringing others together, exploring and reconciling disagreements;
- gate-keeping – bringing everyone into the activity, allowing everyone to participate;
- encouraging – agreement, building, supporting;
- listening – showing understanding; and,
- standard setting – surfacing feelings and beliefs, bringing things out into the open.

Each of the above is a way of acting in a group. Groups and teams with a balance of task orientation and process orientation will tend to be successful both in completing their tasks and in maintaining their environment; that is to say, they will be both productive and happy in their work. MacGregor identified what he termed "effective" and "ineffective" characteristics of work teams by looking at some of these factors in actual performing teams.

Team characteristics

Characteristics of effective teams	Characteristics of ineffective teams
Underlining goals	
Task or objective of the group is clearly understood and accepted by members.	It is difficult to understand from what is said exactly what the group task is, or what the group's objectives are.
Member contributions	
There is a lot of discussion in which everyone participates but it remains pertinent to the group task.	A few people tend to dominate the discussion. Often their contributions are way off the point.
Listening	
Members listen to each other. Every idea is given a hearing.	People do not really listen to one another. Ideas are ignored and over ridden.
Conflict resolution	
There is disagreement. The group is comfortable with this, and shows no signs of having to avoid conflict or keep everything sweetness and light.	Disagreements are not dealt with effectively by the group. They may be suppressed by the leader, avoided or buried.

Decision making	
Most decisions are reached by a type of consensus, which makes it clear that members are in general agreement and/or willing to go along.	Actions are taken prematurely before the real issues are either examined or resolved.
Leadership	
The group leader does not dominate it, nor do group members defer unduly to him or her.	Leadership is clearly in the hands of the group leader. This may be strong or weak but the leader always "sits at the head of the table".
Self evaluation	
The group is conscious of its own operation. It will frequently stop to evaluate progress or what is interfering with task process.	The group tends to avoid discussion on its own "maintenance".
Organisation of task	
When action is taken, clear assignments are made and accepted.	Action decisions tend to be unclear. No one knows who is supposed to do what.

MacGregor's characteristics of effective and ineffective teams depend upon the actions of the individual team members and the way in which they contribute to the communication and processing of information. In this model the group members can actively work to develop their relationships within the team.

Group dynamics

Another approach to the way in which teams work takes a more passive set of processes as its model. In this approach the group members are likely to pass through a number of stages, because of the information-processing needs and the communication issues in the group. These stages can be represented as follows:

▶ **Forming**

This stage is characterised by "testing" behaviours such as greetings and welcomes. People check out the rules or "norms" of the group and begin to plan unconsciously what roles they might take on and what the purpose of the group might be. This stage might also be referred to as preparation for negotiation.

▶ **Storming**

This stage involves competition for role and purpose. This competition can be difficult to recognise, as it can be hidden as well as being open. At the storming stage, people might attack others within the group, withdraw, try to create alliances or dominate others.

Storming is a time when group members test the rules and boundaries that they've identified in the first stage and prepare for the next stage. This stage might also be called negotiation or conflict as people come to terms with each other's needs from the group.

▶ **Norming**

The norming stage is one where the rules begin to be accepted. They "harden" and people have dealt with, or contained, conflict. Group members here begin to take on responsibility for their roles and accept the group's collective purpose. Rules on norms are the accepted processes that guide the nature of the relationship.

▶ **Performing**

This stage is where, internal issues having been dealt with, the group turns outwards to perform its task or meet its goals.

▶ **Mourning**

Mourning is the stage when the group's internal or external purpose no longer exists. Internally, relationships are accepted and possibly static. Externally, the

task may have been completed. Group members will tend to exclude themselves from the relationships and roles that they formerly held. Often there may be a reluctance to face the fact that the group is ending and it may be that one or more members will need to end the group on a positive and celebratory note.

So far, we've looked at three approaches that might help you in working with groups. The first of these emphasises the informal roles within the group and managing relationships through selection. The second emphasises maintenance processes and the sorts of behaviours that can help maintain the relationships within the group. The third emphasises the nature of the relationships within the group, but states that relationships need to pass through certain stages in order to work properly.

What can go wrong?

Groups in organisations can take many different forms – project teams, production teams, committees, quality circles, statistical process control teams, working groups – to name only a few. Whatever they are called, they often frustrate and confuse their members. One of the oldest jokes about groups is that a camel is a horse designed by a committee.

Organisations large and small are full of people who hate working in groups because groups are invariably confused, frustrating and inefficient. They are also threatening and stressful, or at least potentially so.

This attitude is common in small organisations, where much of the achievement has been directly linked to the effort of one person. Small organisations can reflect this "single person" culture. Yet, as we have seen, groups have obvious advantages over individuals. They are more diverse, have greater knowledge, and more time and energy. Groups can be a good way of improving communication. Nevertheless, groups can over-respond to social pressures or individual domination, and personal goals can frustrate group purposes. As well as being productive, inducing commitment, developing people and creating excitement, groups can create stagnation, imprison people, induce conformity and leave people feeling frustrated, worthless and unproductive.

Roles

A role is a position defined within a group that is defined by expectations and needs. The person who occupies a particular role is expected to behave in ways that reflect the role and also because they need to behave in that way.

For instance, a manager will be expected to tell people what to do, be confident and take the initiative. Staff are supposed to obey the rules, work hard and support the manager. Politicians are expected to promise that things will get better if they are elected, and voters are expected to respond sceptically but vote anyway. Roles in an organisation can be defined by titles and job descriptions; for instance, the "Head of the Packing Department" will create certain expectations about appearance, behaviour, etc.

In teams, the roles can be much more informal. Every small group (which meets for a length of time) will have a network of informal roles. This informal network will have a strong, subtle and pervasive influence on the team. We have already seen that the personal characteristics of team members will affect the nature of the task. Different people have different skills and needs that they will bring to the task. Groups will, as we have seen, do better when they structure themselves to take into account differences in skill and preference among team members.

In addition to the roles that are negotiated or imposed because of task needs, there are other sets of roles relating to personal needs, which are quite unconnected with the task.

As long as these informal personal roles are well matched, the team will get along well. But let's presume that another member joins the team. This will have a spin-off effect on the team and people may take sides, with the conflict becoming widespread and ultimately affecting the team's productivity.

Few teams have an unlimited amount of resources or an unlimited number of compatible individuals. They have areas of both compatibility and conflict. Many teams fail to address the role issues that need attention. Some teams see them, but refuse to talk about them for fear of offending others. Avoiding such issues can mean that they reawaken, particularly when the group is under pressure.

Informal group processes

The second issue that can lead to poor team performance is that of the rules or norms which govern the processes within groups. Each team - as with the Eagle group - will develop its own "rules" about how they do things. Often these rules can be so team-specific that they exclude other groups. The sense of cohesion that this gives the group can be very useful. It can also be problematic in that some teams will develop one, two or even three sub-groups.

Remember that just because a group of people is called a team does not mean that they are one. Watch out for the real team within teams; these will be defined by norms of dress, sense of humour, language and one hundred and one other things.

Conflicts

Potential conflict underlies all group processes. If people fail to agree about their respective roles, or fail to negotiate about their respective agendas, or think that others are going off looking for other jobs, this conflict can become real, with a resulting series of problems and loss of productivity.

There are a number of simple guidelines to help deal with group conflict. Teams need to:

- Agree on the basics – that is, identify their own rules or norms and roles; only if all members are equally comfortable with both the informal rules and roles will the teams develop commitment. Remember also that formal titles and processes will impact upon informal roles and rules.
- Agree on the common ground – a team will need to continue to search for, and identify, issues in common. Emphasising common issues will tend to shift attention away from hidden agendas and towards a common purpose. Common purpose should not be confused with common attitude. As we have seen, one of a team's major strengths is its diversity.
- Experiment – where conflict is intractable, it is best to try out new solutions. Experimentation is a powerful tool for obtaining more information where conflict is intractable. It gives the information upon which the group can make a decision to resolve the conflict.
- Doubt their own infallibility – there can be times when a team can turn into five leaders in search of a follower. When this happens, it can help if one of the group at least asks, "What is going on here? Are we sure we are right?"
- Treat differences as a group responsibility – in the event of conflict between two members, it will be a temptation for the other group members to step aside and avoid the conflict. As we have already seen, though, a group is like a car: if it careers off the road, all its constituent parts will suffer. It is the responsibility of the entire group to resolve differences. Even if an issue seems to be entirely personal, it will spill over into the group's ability to work effectively.

Building teams

Developing a small task group involves using a wide range of communicating behaviours. One way of looking at this is the TORI model developed by J. William Pfeiffer[2]. This involves four factors, each of which is a function of communication:

- Trust – confidence in other team members' ability and attitude. Key questions: Do the other team members do what they say they are going to? Can you believe in them?
- Openness – the free flow of information, ideas, perceptions and feelings. Key questions: Do we share information about the task? Do we share information about our own feelings? This factor involves self-disclosure.
- Realisation – self-determination, role freedom. Key questions: What choice do I have in this group or task? How much freedom do I have to develop? This factor impacts upon the nature of the relationship in which the communication takes place.
- Interdependence – shared responsibility, reciprocal influence. Key questions: How much does my job depend on others in the team? How much do others depend on me? This factor also impacts upon the nature of the relationships.

You can use these four factors to build your own team within the vision you have developed and shared. Trust will come about when you yourself demonstrate your own trustworthiness and trust others. Openness will develop as you share information and feelings in a positive way. Realisation is about the amount of choice that you give to other team members and interdependence is about a shared vision of a common future.

Team and task

Whilst the internal mechanisms of a team are important – roles, relationships, etc – so is a team relationship with its task. High performance teams will need tasks that are consonant with their abilities. Teams tend to work more effectively when involved in finite, measurable projects, which involve the whole team and which they have the opportunity to complete.

Teams tend to get things done. Team building is not, however, a partial process. Done properly, team building can release much of the energy locked within the organisation. A partial process can either not release the energy, in which case you've wasted your own time and effort, or release it in ways which you find hard to control.

Teams need to expend the energy that is generated by bringing them together. If you don't have anything for the team to work at, it will waste that energy on backbiting and politics or on completing the wrong task. Releasing the energy in relationships allows teams to perform much more effectively than groups.

Teams can produce	Groups produce
total involvement	partial involvement
voluntary effort	involuntary effort
decisions	recommendations
a focus on success and performance	a focus on failure and problems
flexible structures	permanent structure and roles
changes in managers	no change in managers

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[2] J. William Pfeiffer, "A Handbook of Structured Experiences", University Associates, 1985.