

teamworking

looking at teams and how they operate in the workplace

Steve Shellabear explores the challenges of establishing a team and working within it in a corporate environment. He provides an overview of key areas that will help those setting up new teams or working within a team that they would like to function better.

For many of us the word 'team' conjures up images of sports such as football, hockey or cricket. At best, it carries with it associations of co-operation, trust and accomplishment. At worst for the individualist, it may be just another element to deal with and manage. In exploring the subject, it may help to have an overview of what a team is and what can be seen, heard and felt when it's working. A team has shared objectives; the jobs and skills of each person fit with the others. A team is more than just a group of people who happen to find themselves working in the same environment. A team is committed to achievement and each other. As a result, the team as a whole is able to accomplish more than an individual on his or her own. There is usually recognition of and respect for the value and interdependence of its members.

I first became interested in teamworking early in my career during a period of intensive training to become a group leader. I remember a friend and mentor impressing on me that 'wherever there is trouble there is no result'. I found that when performance was low, there was invariably accompanying dissatisfaction. To change this required an unyielding focus on achieving results. I learnt that having a shared purpose and demanding performance challenge was the catalyst that brought together a disparate group of personalities. This was not at the cost of personal or professional development of the team members. In fact, quite the opposite.

That organisation (which went on to become a publicly listed company) and others that have achieved major growth objectives recognised the importance of encouraging self-awareness and learning to perfect the tasks required, and devoted considerable time and resources to facilitating this.

THE TRAINING PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

It has long been the aim of many managers and leaders to have an environment where individuals:

- work well together
- consistently achieve their goals, and
- feel recognised and appreciated.

Yet even when this is formally stated as an objective, the stresses of organisational life seem to make it difficult to accomplish. Teamwork is often perceived as the missing

ingredient and when the pain of doing nothing is greater than the pain of tackling the problem, trainers and change agents may be invited in to the organisation to recommend and implement suitable interventions.

Team-building exercises are often asked for as a predetermined solution. While these can be of some value, if lasting benefits are to be generated the client situation usually requires a more complex solution. In my experience, team-building exercises are rarely sufficient on their own and may actually generate cynicism when they fail to produce the hoped for panacea.

To make the appropriate intervention, it is vitally important that the consultant fully understands the organisation and details of the problem, management expectations and the team's performance before submitting proposals or agreeing to those put forward by the client. It is also necessary to be aware of past interventions tried by the client or other specialists. This helps to avoid duplication, enabling positive reinforcement of key messages and tailoring the solution to the organisational context - that is, the client's company's culture, objectives, enablers and constraints. Appreciating the dynamics of the client's relationship with its past advisers may also provide indicators of how best to support the client as well as avoid potential pitfalls.

CHARACTERISTICS, VALUES AND BEHAVIOURS

Adair (1) identifies overlapping characteristics of teams that are worthy of consideration and supported by other authorities in the field. He includes having a common task, a hierarchy of team roles, high quality of leadership, a shared historical background, encouraging the participation of all members, cohesiveness, supportive atmosphere, defined standards and structure related to the common task. He goes on to define a properly functioning team as one in which:

- people care for each other
- people are open and truthful
- there is a high level of trust
- decisions are made by consensus
- there is a strong team commitment
- conflict is faced up to and worked through
- people really listen to ideas and to feelings
- feelings are expressed freely
- process issues (tasks and feelings) are dealt with.

My experience of presenting similar values and conditions to delegates in training sessions is that when most people assess the work groups of which they are a part, a high proportion report an absence of many.

It appears that there is a fair degree of misunderstanding about teamworking in corporate life. Much of this may be because, while many espouse teamworking values, in reality the organisation supports the values of the individual, which are believed to be different

from the group. This can be confusing when being a ‘good team player’ is asked for of new recruits at job interview, but people are selected on the basis of their individual abilities and individual performance is monitored and rewarded. Directors can also unwittingly create confusion by espousing aspirational team values such as ‘This whole company works as one big team’, when the reality is far from that.

Unacknowledged conflicting objectives such as service level agreements with other departments can also be points of contention, making interdepartmental teamwork problematic.

Perhaps a good place for the facilitator to begin is to question the assumption that teamwork is always necessary and ask whether the nature of the work actually requires teamwork. Many organisations, groups and individuals survive and flourish in highly competitive commercial environments, without explicitly promoting teamwork values. These organisations invariably emphasise individual achievement.

There is evidence that as some individuals progress up an organisational hierarchy into senior management they are required to work less as team members. However, for those tasks when they do (such as defining strategy), teamwork skills are usually vital.

Teamworking skills can include:

- technical/functional knowledge
- communication and interpersonal skills
- decision-making skills, and
- problem-solving skills.

McCall (2) points out that many talented managers hone skills for achieving spectacular short-term results but are unable to function at higher levels requiring teamwork, co-ordination and co-operation with others, leading to quick and dramatic derailment of their careers.

Katzenbach and Smith (3) agree that teamwork values help teams to perform, but state that value also promote performance as individuals and the performance of the organisation. They state that teamwork valued by themselves are not enough to ensure team performance. For those planning teams this reinforces the argument to consider all of the characteristics outlined earlier. Perhaps the second question a facilitator might ask of a client is: ‘What might be the benefits of increasing teamwork?’

SELECTION AND ASSESSMENT

It is generally acknowledged that having the right mix of team members is essential for a team to work. The components of this mix will always be determined by the requirements of the team to accomplish its objective(s). Therefore, the function largely determines the attributes, skills capabilities and behaviours of the person required. Various models exist for team roles, the most popular probably being those developed by Belbin in the 1980s

and 1990s (4,5) and it is useful to have a grounding in the theory before designing the team.

The task of recruiting team members is ideally suited to trained specialists if the unconscious bias of managers and directors is to be avoided. All too often, managers recruit new staff in their own likeness perpetuating the strengths and weaknesses of the existing organisational culture. Competency profiling (6), psychometric testing and in-depth psychological assessments are some of the methods that may be used. It is often possible and desirable to train managers in the necessary skills, legislation and know-how to play an instrumental part in the recruitment process, and their participation can be invaluable.

TEAM DYNAMICS

Like any entity, a team is not static. It changes as its members change. Teamwork grows through the experience of people working together over time. Observing the group from the outside, it may be possible to witness these changes. Tuckman's (7) well-known model of group development identifies five main stages, as shown in Figure 1. However, while it is over-simplistic to seek to apply this or any other model to all phases of group development, it can be helpful to notice the changes as a means of creating meaning for those progressing through them.

Figure 1: Tuckman's five stages of group development

stage 1: forming

There is considerable anxiety and searching by group members to understand the task and rules.

stage 2: storming

Individuals react against the leader or the group.

stage 3: norming

Harmonisation and support emerge as the group focuses on the task.

stage 4: performing

The group structures itself around achieving the task. Members take up roles and flexibility emerges, and achievements are made as the group focusses its energy on the job in hand.

stage 5: mourning

This occurs after the group has disbanded and as members come to terms with its absence prior to seeking a new identity.

A PSYCHODYNAMIC PERSPECTIVE

As corporate organisations are becoming increasingly sophisticated, I have included a brief reference to the psychoanalysis of organisations. This has been practised since the early 1950s. Its pioneers are Kurt Lewin (perhaps best known for his force field analysis) and Elliott Jaques (best known for social defence systems adopted by organisations against anxiety).

Viewing their development through a psychodynamic perspective, James and Jarrett (8) believe that the 'drive to become a "team" and engage in team development provides some other, possibly unconscious function, as a defence against task anxiety'. They go on to suggest that: 'The psychodynamics of group life will develop a range of regressive group cultures.' Diamond's (9) categories of these are shown in Table 1.

The above study related to a top management team, for which it might be argued there was more discretion regarding the formation of the team. However, a team is commonly differentiated from a work group by the strong sense of purpose and high level of commitment to other team members, which suggests the same dynamics may come into play.

While these psychological terms may not be familiar to all of us, the model can provide elements of group dynamics that are recognisable in our own organisations and warrant our attention.

Table 1: Diamond's four categories of group life

1: the homogenised group

Typified by the inability of members to differentiate between self and others. Often leaderless, this group experiences uncertainty, stress, low self-esteem and low morale. Political behaviour is self-serving and ego defending.

2. The institutionalised group

Typified by over-reliance on systems, routines, hierarchy, structure and impersonal authority. Fears relationship with authority. Persecutory of members.

3. The autocratic work group

Typified by group members giving up their personal authority and boundaries to that of an all-powerful and charismatic leader. The leader is idealised, both loved and hated. The leader is unable to fulfil the fantasised expectations of the group or control the group's aggression.

4. The resilient group

Typified by all regressive processes of previous three groups, but is capable of understanding the unconscious dynamics and working with them. It values insight and has a mutual commitment to emotional well-being of members. As such, defensive group dynamics are seen as opportunities to learn.

THE TEAM LEADER'S ROLE

Not surprisingly, my studies conducted in call and contact centres indicate that the manager and team leader(s) are perceived as highly influential in determining the values and behaviour of the team. Functional knowledge, caring for team members and approachability were cited as primary requisites. However, as with the 'right' team mix the appropriate team leadership style (whether directive, collaborative or laissez-faire) and accompanying skill set was determined by the objectives and situational requirements of the team at any given time. Effective team leaders were found to delegate, listen and genuinely recognise the contribution others made towards achieving the group objective.

CONCLUSION

Working in teams can represent a unique opportunity for us to develop and experience a success beyond what we could achieve as individuals. They can also be the source of much friendship, enjoyment and job satisfaction. To make the most of working in teams we can benefit from understanding how to set them up and maintain them.

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