

DEVELOPING MORE EFFECTIVE ORGANISATION TEAMWORK

an information paper from Richard Smith Associates

Background

Many organisations are continuing to reduce the number of layers in their management structures - and in doing so are establishing an increasing reliance on teams. Some wish to establish customer-focused teams in a service environment, others to develop a more effective use of project teams across the organisation, still others to bring down historic barriers between functions. Teams may become self-directed and self-managing or may retain a more traditional organisation structure.

Increasing the effectiveness of teamwork has, as a result of these various pressures, become a key strategic challenge for many organisations.

This article highlights some common teamworking issues and principles which - applied appropriately - can help develop business competitiveness by means of improved team effectiveness.

Teams and organisation structure

The trigger for organisations to review their structures is often either pressure in their external markets or internal competition for resources. Almost invariably, change involves 'de-layering', which reduces the effectiveness of traditional command/control supervision, and leads to greater autonomy for individuals.

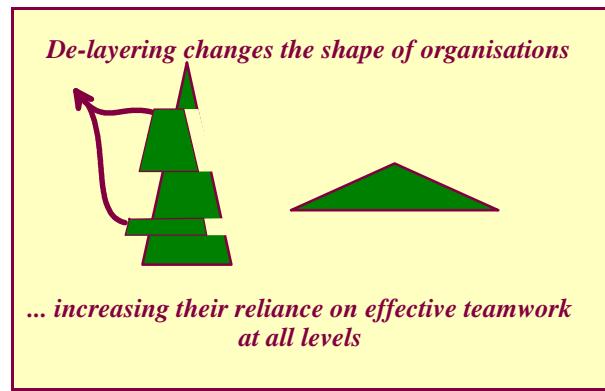
People value the recognition which follows review of their work, so an increase in autonomy must be balanced by an increase in peer supervision. This may take the form of larger teams meeting with a senior manager to review progress and achievements, or may result in a fully-fledged self-directed team structure. (Either approach has impact on training and career issues, which require careful planning if the best people are to be attracted, retained and motivated. Detailed discussion of options is beyond the scope of this article; contact us for details.)

Project and process teams

Another trend is to make clearer distinctions between "project" work (new, one-off developments) and "process" work (routine, systematic, quality-assured and increasingly automated). Peer supervision works well in process environments, but the risky nature of project work makes strategic supervision vital. It is usually possible for senior 'sponsors' to provide this for project managers.

Less straightforward, however, is the management of the individual project team members. Project team

members with various kinds of knowledge and skill are asked to apply their expertise to finite pieces of work, often short-term and frequently overlapping. Those involved in this kind of work have to take primary responsibility for managing their own contribution to various working teams. This requires both a positive attitude and a high level of team skills on the part of each individual if an unacceptable 'overhead' of team inefficiencies is to be avoided.



Teams, problem-solving and creativity

The preceding paragraphs focus on teamworking as a defensive measure, or at least as a necessary response to new organisation structures designed for other reasons - such as to improve efficiency in a competitive environment. Teams however are also increasingly used for the well-documented creative synergy which can be found in good teams. Good teams are more effective than individuals at solving complex problems, and the 'spark' of creativity is more often found in good teams than in the ivory tower! Examples of such uses include the use of quality teams to generate process improvements and high-level R&D or marketing teams which seek to formulate and exploit new products and services.

Team readiness and effectiveness

Changes in organisation structure or practice are often met with scepticism - even suspicion - from staff. Increased use of teams is not exempt from this!

Whatever the cause of organisation change, it is vital that credible, consistent and supportive messages come from the organisation's management team. Mixed messages communicated through unguarded words from senior lips, an outdated reward structure or lack of visible investment in teamworking skills will undermine an 'official' positive message; individuals will divert energy into self-protective behaviour and not focus it on organisational goals.

A coherent picture of the logic and direction of any cultural change must be articulated clearly and consistently by all members of the organisation's senior team. Such clarity requires time to come to a common mind, and may be helped by a skilled facilitator familiar with culture change issues.

Apart from receiving clear communication of what is expected, individuals need to appreciate for themselves the benefits to the organisation and to themselves from increased team working. This is best achieved experientially, through workshops designed to increase the 'team readiness' of staff. Such workshops allow people to discover from concentrated experience how teams can work synergistically (the effectiveness of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts!), and how they as individuals can best manage their own contribution.

Long-term programmes to include team effectiveness workshops in organisations' regular training and development provision can help develop a 'learning organisation' and simplify a variety of organisational changes over time. Short-term, urgent programmes, whilst more resource intensive (and therefore costly), can work if a trusting climate is reasonably intact.

Team construction

Historically, the main criterion set by managers constructing teams has been to ensure that they contain the right professional skills to deliver results. This has focused selection effort on the technical knowledge and skill of potential team members.

As Dr. Meredith Belbin demonstrated in his seminal research at Henley Management College (and since), such preoccupation with technical skills omits the vital element of interpersonal chemistry. Ultimately this research showed that it is possible to construct teams with a much better-than-average chance of performing to a very high level.

The significance of this for organisations constructing project teams - and indeed when

replacing members of conventional management teams - is enormous. However even where such care has been taken in team construction, an educational process is required to familiarise the team members with the reasons for combining the particular people concerned, enabling them to plan together how to use to greatest effect their inherent advantages as a balanced team.

Team development

A third approach which helps organisations make better use of teams to promote change and increase performance is to develop the effectiveness of existing teams. This is not readily achieved by conventional training or education processes, due to the web of procedures, habits and relationships which already exist in such a team - for good or ill!

Discussion of this approach is the subject of another Information Paper.

Conclusions

We have discussed how issues of culture have a deep impact on the ability of an organisation to use teams effectively, and the importance of achieving a state of readiness for new team structures amongst members of the organisation. We have also discussed the need for an appropriate mix of personal styles as well as professional skills of a team, if maximum effectiveness is to follow.

Through all the above it is clear that merely announcing the value attached to teamwork, or implementing new team structures, will not achieve anything. Like developing a productive garden, active planning and hard work are required to support vision and intention. The synergy, flexibility and power of teams are available to organisations that prepare the ground well, plant the right combination of individuals in fertile team soil and intelligently apply the appropriate resources to nurture existing teams.

About Richard Smith Associates

Richard Smith Associates is a niche management consultancy which aims to help organisations to get the best from their people, *releasing potential, equipping leaders and facilitating change*.

We provide specialist business advice and resources on all aspects of performance management, management development and training, change leadership training and development, team building and team development issues, as well as using our facilitation skills to support organisation development and change management processes. We work with organisations on culture change programmes, providing the external perspective, knowledge and experience which lead to successful outcomes.

All our consultants are seasoned professionals who have worked on development issues from within organisations large and small, in addition to their extensive consulting experience.

More information, together with examples of our work, is available at www.richardsmithassociates.com