

TEAM DEVELOPMENT FOR TOP TEAMS - AT ALL LEVELS

an information paper from Richard Smith Associates

Background

Another Information Paper in this series (*Developing More Effective Organisational Teamwork, May 2003*) describes some of the organisational and cultural factors which are driving the increasing importance of teams in delivering organisations' business goals. It also highlights the importance of skilful team construction and a broad organisational base of training in team readiness and effectiveness; lack of either or both of these frequently affects organisations' ability to make the best use of teams.

There is however a third approach which helps organisations make better use of teams to promote change and increase performance; it is to develop the effectiveness of existing teams as models of what can be achieved. This may be vital where a particular team is key to business success, and change is not readily achieved by conventional training or education processes.

Such existing teams are more or less productive on a business level due to the web of procedures, habits and relationships which already exist. This web has developed over a period of time, and will not change instantly! Discussion in this paper relates particularly to top team development, but a similar process can be applied to developing management or professional teams at any level of the organisation.

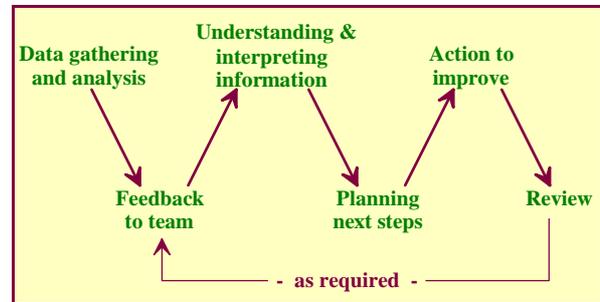
Why engage in team development?

The purpose of team development is to give members the opportunity of stepping back from current issues in order to focus on team processes. This allows them to examine their ways of working with and relating to each other - both personally and professionally - and to plan together how to develop both in the interests of the team's mission.

Because all members of the team are contributors to the *status quo* it is important to seek the help of a skilled and experienced facilitator from outside the team. The person chosen must have the trust and develop the respect of team members. The facilitator is likely to achieve this through discussion of the objectives of the process as seen by various members of the team, and of the process to be used. In most cases an experienced facilitator will seek to establish the team as a whole as his/her client, rather than just the individual team member through whom (s)he was introduced.

A process outlined

A process used quite frequently - and very effectively - is illustrated below.



It starts with data gathering, a phase in which information is sought and collated about the way the team currently works. This data includes both objective elements about how the team works (meeting structures, areas of responsibility etc.) and subjective aspects (how people feel about these). This information - is drawn primarily from the opinions of the team members concerned.

This data may be gathered by a survey instrument either from a published source (Francis & Young's *"Team Review Questionnaire"* is a good example) or designed especially for the team concerned. Alternatively the data may be gathered by confidential interview, which allows more situational sensitivity and greater richness. The data - however gathered - is then collated by the facilitator, prior to giving feedback, into a framework which is meaningful to the team in the light of its objectives.

Feedback to the team

The provision of feedback to the team is akin to holding up a mirror. The aim is that the team can see clearly what is happening, giving them information about where their procedures and relationships are seen to be working effectively and where they are not. It will usually occur at a meeting specially convened for the purpose, most often away from the workplace, to minimise interruptions. Wherever possible, the facilitator will include examples and (unattributed) quotations, to help give a practical 'everyday' feel to the information fed back.

Addressing the issues

The process of understanding and interpreting the information requires honest discussion between team

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members about the information presented. Facilitation here is focussed on supporting open expression of perceptions by various team members, and helping the team as a whole to hear, to understand and where possible to integrate differing views. The value of this process can be enormous, as members understand - sometimes for the first time - why they have been approaching business issues in quite different ways.

From understanding to action

Planning next steps follows naturally from, and is often integrated with, the understanding and interpreting stage. An action list is maintained throughout this discussion, on which practical improvement steps to be taken (by named team members, within agreed timeframes) are listed. Typically a 1½ day team build may yield 25 to 50 agreed actions - all focused on improving the effectiveness of the team as a whole.

It is important that, following an implementation period, a review session is scheduled. This team meeting lasting ¼ to ½ a day is dedicated to reviewing progress on the team's development. Difficulties are addressed, successes are celebrated, and plans are made for further development of the team, and for progress reviews to track it.

An example of this process makes clear some of the possibilities, and is given in the Case Study panel

Alternatives and enhancements

Endless variations on the process described are of course possible and indeed desirable. No one 'carbon copy' process will meet the needs of all teams. The essential outcome of any effective design

will be that the team as a whole takes charge of its own performance as a legitimate part of its business agenda.

As mentioned in the case study, use of appropriate individual feedback questionnaires can help to prepare team members to discuss and address what might otherwise be considered personal issues

Case study

The business Board in one region of a global company undertook a team development process as part of its initiative to transform the structure and leadership culture of its business. The 'data gathering' phase included use of individual 360° feedback questionnaires examining personal leadership styles. Results of these were fed back to Board members by a trained facilitator during a private interview, at which time their individual perceptions of the team and its leader were also discussed.

A two-day team workshop provided a facilitated opportunity for the Board to develop a shared view of the leadership style needed to take the organisation forward - and the actions to be undertaken by Board members to lead and model this change. Time was also set aside to help participants to engage in a live mutual feedback activity, building greater understanding and trust.

Immediate results of the process included improved trust and openness between Board members, leading to shorter, more productive Board meetings - and a higher level of satisfaction reported by Board members. Managers throughout the organisation commented on the unity and effectiveness of the Board's leadership during the change process which followed. Longer term, the business was faced with a merger and integration initiated by the parent company. Uniquely in its area of the world this business carried the process through successfully, remaining united and committed.

affecting the team's effectiveness. Inclusion of a range of creative and challenging team activities or exercises can also provide 'real time' opportunity for members to observe the team at work.

Whatever ingredients are included in the final recipe, the key is to engage the team itself in defining outcomes both for the team development process and for the team's 'personal best' contribution to the organisation of which it is a part.

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