

The Team Under Pressure

The Situation

The management team of a technical services and support department were facing a number of difficult issues. Seeking ISO9002 accreditation and managing a range of procedural changes designed to achieve it, the team was experiencing a degree of conflict. Also the department as a whole had a number of disaffected members who saw the management team as seriously divided. All were dreading the forthcoming departmental conference.

The Analysis

The approach taken to this team was to arrange private sensing interviews with each member of the team, on the basis that anything said in those meetings would not be attributed.

During the sensing interviews the conflict in the team became apparent as members spoke with little respect or confidence about each other.

A number of members of the team were aware of the disaffected members of the department, and of the generally low esteem in which the team was held by its subordinates.

A variety of structural, personal and interpersonal issues were raised.

The Solution

A 1½-day off-site meeting was convened to report back to the team the interview findings:

First the issues raised by team members were presented in a simple flipchart presentation, organised by themes (without reference to who said what) and illustrated by verbatim quotations. This gave the chance for the team to see itself more clearly.

Each theme was then discussed and the facilitator collected agreed action points on a separate flipchart list.

During the meeting, time was set aside for a mutual feedback process, enabling team members to express areas of difficulty and to agree how they could work together more productively.

The facilitator circulated agreed action points to all team members shortly after the off-site meeting, and the team reviewed progress on these at their regular meetings.

The Outcomes

Relationships within the team improved markedly.

ISO9002 procedures were in place and accredited within the planned timescale.

The management team began to collaborate in its meetings, rather than to snipe.

The departmental conference went very well. The turning point came when one of the management team was presenting and receiving a somewhat critical response from the members of the department. One of his colleagues (known by the whole department to have little regard for the manager concerned) leapt up at the back of the room and supported him crying: "He's doing a difficult job! Listen to what he's saying - it's important." In the shock of this spontaneous - and unexpected - display of unity, the whole department began to re-evaluate their management team with greater respect.