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‘Every man for himself’: Teamwork and Customer Service in the Hospitality Industry.

Abstract

Purpose: To examine the practice of teamwork in an under-researched, yet growing industrial setting.

Design/methodology/approach: Longitudinal ethnographic-styled methods of data collection were used and data was examined using the Teams Dimensions Model.

Findings: The findings suggest the Teams Dimensions Model, with the addition of a customer service perspective, is of use for identifying managerial objectives and organisational outcomes of teamwork. However, this does not suggest that teamworking is easy to implement in the hospitality setting.

Research limitations/implications: The findings were obtained using unobtrusive participatory and observational methods and based on a single company.

Practical implications: The paper allows management practitioners to reflect on realities of implementing teamworking under a corporate customer service initiative.

Originality/value: The paper takes an existing theory on teamworking and develops the theory in an under-researched and growing industrial sector.

Key words: Teamwork, Hospitality industry, Team Dimensions Model, ethnography

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

The debate around teamwork has, for the most part, reflected production processes in manufacturing environments (Bacon et al., 2010; Marks and Lockyer, 2004; van den Broek, Callaghan and Thompson, 2004). Examples include Findlay et al.’s (2001a,

2001b) and Thompson and Wallace's (1996) research which focuses on manual, unionised workers undertaking routine and repetitive work in the motor industry and other production settings. This type of work has provided the basis for the majority of concepts and classifications concerning teamworking. The question arising from this narrowly constrained research is whether existing conceptual frameworks for analysing teamworking can be translated to any white-collar work beyond the merely routine (Lloyd and Newell, 2000; Marks and Lockyer, 2004)?

The extent to which teamwork has actually been examined with any rigour among non-production employees is limited. It has focused on areas such as healthcare, where teams are multi-disciplinary and issues such as collegiality, hierarchy and professionalism emerge (Finn et al., 2010; Lloyd and Newell, 2000; West and Poulton, 1997). Further work has, however, focused on employees undertaking relatively routine service sector tasks, which often imitate teamworking models in manufacturing (e.g. Kinnie and Purcell, 1998) or white collar 'intellectual' production work such as software development (Marks and Lockyer, 2004). A new development in this literature involves investigating the formation of, and problems associated with, virtual teams (e.g. Hallier and Baralou 2010). Where there has been some depth of research into non-production teams is in call centres. For example, in a study of two call centres, Kinnie et al. (2000) argue that teams in this service setting are managed by a combination of tight control and high commitment management, which involves teamwork as well as other features such as low value incentives.

Kinnie et al.'s (2000) research and other work on service sector teams (e.g. Baldry et al., 1998) have found little evidence for the full package of teamwork practices – e.g. flexibility, devolved responsibility, problem solving – found in manufacturing settings. However, van den Broek et al. (2004) argue that whilst some of the structural components of teamwork, including job rotation and multi-skilling are likely to be absent in interactive service contexts, a 'softer' form of teamwork exists for performance management and governance purposes. That is, the team can be used to introduce competition or measure collective performance as well as being used for either explicit or more covert control processes. This follows the work of Batt (1999) who suggests this 'scaled down' version of teamwork, for call centre workers, should focus on collective learning and problem solving.

Significantly, van den Broek et al. (2004) highlight the normative objectives of service sector teams. By emphasising the notion of the ‘team member’ or the ‘team player’, organizations attempt to modify the attitudes and behaviours of employees and to create and regulate a shared identity. This rhetoric of teamwork, adopted unquestioningly in many manufacturing settings, has been transferred to service sector work, where the infrastructure is less hospitable to teamwork. Indeed, HRM agendas in service sector organizations use teams to buttress a unitarist ideology. For example, Korczynski’s (2001) work found that call centre employees, for the most part, accepted the notion of teamwork despite being short of the traditional interdependency associated with teams.

The aim of the current paper is to examine, *in situ*, the practice of teamwork in a setting where there is even less evidence of effective teamwork (e.g. Ingram and Desombre, 1999; Rees, 1999) than in call centres – a hotel restaurant. Despite The World Tourism Organization maintaining that tourism, and specifically hotels and catering, is the world’s largest industry there is limited empirical research on work organization, particularly teamwork, in this sector (Salanova et al., 2005). The current work, adapts Thompson and Wallace’s (1996) Team Dimensions Model (TDM) to explore the data – obtained through an ethnographic-styled study – in order to assess whether teamwork, in this context, has any real merit as a human resource practice or as means by which employees derive some level of job satisfaction. We argue that more research needs to be undertaken to explore teamwork in service settings, other than call centres. We also demonstrate how the importance of customer service is under-conceptualised in existing models of teamwork and include this as an important dimension of our analysis. Moreover, teamwork in the hospitality industry results in a paradox for employees, who typically view teamwork as a form of control. Employees are presented with the language of teamwork, yet continue to work in a highly individualised and somewhat antagonistic environment. Even Batt’s (1999) and van den Broek et al.’s (2004) idea of softer teamwork for service sector settings is, for the most part, notably absent.

Conceptualising Teamwork

Whilst Benders and van Hootehem (2000) argue that contemporary teamwork practices have emerged from two discernable traditions, sociotechnical theory and the Japanese model, Mulholland (2002) rightly suggests that these two approaches are underpinned by an identical managerial logic, that is, to use teams to improve productivity and manage performance. Moreover, she argues that both are also based on the notion of unity over conflict in the workplace. Gallie et al (forthcoming) note that the positive aspects of introducing teamworking are linked to increases in task discretion and job satisfaction. Yet, the evidence, particularly in terms of unity in service sector environments, frequently conflicts with this ideology. There is little evidence that teamwork in these contexts either improves performance or normative values and behaviours. Baldry et al. (1998) found, from their study of teamwork in the finance sector, that teams not only failed to produce job enrichment, but led to routinisation and controlled the work process – so much so that they labelled the process ‘Team Taylorism’ to illustrate the low levels of job satisfaction and the tight physical and technological surveillance. In this study there was visible conflict in the workplace and not the idealised harmony that the HRM agenda would wish to portray. Furthermore, in their examination of teamworking in a pharmaceutical sales force, Lloyd and Newell (2000) found if evaluated against the standard list of practices and objectives generally described in the literature, teamwork for this group of workers increased neither flexibility nor commitment. There was also little evidence that it increased internal discipline or performance levels.

Whilst we could argue that these, and the examples provided in the introduction, provide limited evidence for effective teamwork in the service sector, it could also be argued that many existing methods of examination or conceptualisation of teamwork may not be appropriate for the analysis of service work. It could be suggested that many models of teamwork are relatively narrow and unlikely to reflect the reality of teams across occupational contexts.

By signifying that existing concepts fail to provide acceptable frameworks for the understanding of non-manufacturing evaluation of teams, one would assume some uniformity in frameworks for research and theorising focusing on production employees. Yet, there are indications that the broader notion of teamwork itself is infinitely flexible and problematic to define (Buchanan, 2000). One reason is the

considerable variation in the size of teams and of the scope and range of issues over which the team exercises discretion. Evidence from even renowned studies is uneven. Rice's (1958, 1963) work reported the teams comprising of six members. Trist et al.'s (1951) miners, meanwhile, worked in groups of more than forty. Buchanan and McCalman's (1989) high performance teams typically had between eight and twelve members. At a further extreme, Proctor et al. (2004) reported that *The Economist* (1997) detailed car manufacturer Fiat's creation of a three hundred strong international 'team' to create a new vehicle. Similar extremes occur when describing the function of the team, where teams may exercise discretion over trivial matters (e.g. timing of breaks) or responsibility for major issues (e.g. selection and training of new members) (Buchanan, 2000; Findlay et al., 2000a).

Whilst writers such as Mueller (1994, p.383) provide clear definitions of a team:

... a team shall be understood as a group of 8 – 15 members, and is responsible for producing a well-defined output within a recognisable territory, where members rotate from job to job with some regularity, under a flexible allocation of tasks.

The reality of teams and teamwork, or at least how organizations define them, is not so straightforward. Perhaps the starting point, is therefore allowing for breadth of understanding of both teams and teamwork. As Benders and van Hooft (2000) suggest, in order to avoid exclusive and narrow definitions, anything called a team should be accepted as a team.

We are not suggesting that teamwork is so amorphous a concept that it defies definition, but it has to be acknowledged that organizations define and operate teamwork in different ways. As Batt (1999) and van den Broek et al. (2004) both demonstrate, some form of teamwork can exist without the traditional sociotechnical or Japanisation experience. Accordingly, for their research on call centre teams van den Broek et al. (2004) and Mulholland (2002) drew on the Team Dimensions Model (Thompson and Wallace, 1996; Findlay et al., 2000a, 2000b) to examine the teamwork experience. The advantage of this three dimensional model (see Figure One) is that it allows the analysis and understanding of the relationship between managerial objectives and teamwork practice (Findlay et al., 2000a) in the technical, normative and governance domains. Instead of solely relating teamwork to

‘academic’ definitions, this model allows the understanding of the application of the concept according to organizationally defined ideas.

INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE

The TDM could be described as a pragmatic mechanism for the evaluation of teamwork and, as such, has influenced a number of other writers (e.g. Delbridge et al., 2000; McCabe, 2000; Bélanger and Edwards, 2002), as it enables researchers to develop an assessment of teamwork without being forced into defining teams according to pre-existing classifications. Like other similar frameworks (e.g. Marchington, 2000) this model has acknowledged the results from an evaluation of the broader teamwork literature and accepts the overwhelming rationale for the introduction of teams by organizations is instrumental and realistic. There is therefore, a strong focus on what can be described as the technical dimension, such as the application of knowledge and employee flexibility. This is based on the origins of the model which drew on manufacturing experiences. However, Mulholland (2002) used the TDM to show the focus on technical control – as well as gender politics and exploitation of emotional labour – in a call centre. Rees (1999), although not using the TDM, explained the importance of the technical rationale for the introduction of teamworking in the hospitality industry.

Both Mulholland (2002) and van den Broek et al. (2004) found evidence (although highly constrained) of the role of the governance dimension in service sector teams. The governance dimension, addresses the part managers and experts have traditionally played in the work process. It specifically focuses on direct supervision – that is, the shift from one manager overseeing one hundred employees to a team leader with responsibility for far fewer team members (Procter et al., 2004). The governance dimension is predominantly concerned with the expanded managerial and organizational roles that employees need to adopt.

Findlay et al. (2000a) believe there is a degree of common ground in the managerial agenda concerning the technical dimension, regardless of the actual outcomes of teamwork. Indeed, there is also some evidence of action in the service sector in the governance domain. However, there is a distinct lack of support of progression in the normative dimension for service sector employees (e.g. van den Broek et al, 2004).

Mueller (1994) argues that teamworking is frequently used as a socialisation vehicle for resolving tensions between individual goals and organizational rationality. Indeed, one of the principal discussions regarding the normative dimension of teamwork is the use of the team as a mechanism for instilling corporate values into individual team members. It is particularly the operationalisation of these corporate values that differs between manufacturing environments and particularly, customer facing service work. For manufacturing teams, there is little interaction with the customer – customer service is either a more abstract concept or related to internal customer and normative values. Whereas for many service organizations, particularly for hospitality work, it is not just the technical dimension of work, but customer service is the rationale for any form of work organization.

INSERT FIGURE TWO HERE

As Ingram and Desombre (1999) note, hospitality, like other service industries is heavily reliant upon co-operation to achieve complex, consumer-related objectives. This is reflected in the objectives of teamwork in terms of customer service and satisfaction. However, Ingram and Desombre (1999) found the focus of teamwork in hotels on customer service, detracts from other normative requirements of this form of work organization. They noted that teams tend to be large and characterised by conflict, possibly due to poorly defined membership and typically failed to have a sense of shared purpose suggesting that it is high turnover in the hospitality industry that acts against the continuity and relationships that support effective teambuilding. Rees (1999) found a strong sense of team identity but that teams were in reality large and undefined ‘teams’ – or example a team was the whole of a food and beverage unit. Again, however, he argues that the function of teamwork is predominantly for improved customer service and that teamworking is used to control or limit the discretion of employees. With this evidence, of customer service as a managerial rationale for teamwork, we propose that at least for hospitality organizations, this should be included as another facet in the Team Dimensions Model (Figure Two). The analysis section of this paper includes the addition of this dimension as part of a new conceptual framework, and examines this as well as the traditional three dimensions in order to explore teamworking in a hotel catering facility.

Methods

Hotelrest was the subject of twelve weeks of data collection. The methodologies used were essentially ethnographic, supplemented by recognition of company documentation. Unobtrusive participant observation was considered to be the most appropriate method of investigating this form of organizational behaviour (Analoui 1995; Analoui and Kakabadse 1989). The data collection was undertaken by one of the authors who gained access to Hotelcorp by accepting paid employment as a food host and in the final four weeks of the study as a waiter and assuming the dual role of employee, team worker and research data collector. The researcher and data collector was employed on a part-time basis (approximately 20-25 hours per week involving four shifts of 5-6 hours each week) and worked during breakfast and lunch settings of the restaurant.

This method of data collection has been undertaken by many other researchers (e.g. Roy 1952; Bradney 1957; Analoui and Kakabadse 1989; Graham 1995; Calvey 2000; Mulholland 2011) and helps overcome the unwillingness of management to let academics research the phenomenon as well as the reluctance of employees to divulge information regarding the trend under investigation. Observations are efficient because it reveals behaviour that people usually prefer not to report and the researcher has greater opportunity to identify manifestations without attempts to conceal or distort them. Furthermore, longitudinal studies may reveal causal relationships. Other than documentary information in the form of corporate literature, the vast majority of data was collected in the form of daily journal entries based on observed activities, the recollection of everyday and more intended and directed conversations with fellow employees and regular reflective accounts of emerging patterns in team activity. To demonstrate this point and commitment to the research method, the final diary of events at Hotelrest was comprised of over 30,000 words. Inevitably, such a large diary of events assembled by one person, who also has to work under the same pressures as the research participants, is bound to come with its limitations, such as the recording of events in a personal writing style and subjective accounts of day-to-day events. However, a clear strength of such an approach is that it allows the typical reader of academic writings the opportunity to be taken to a world most would not have an

opportunity to go and see such hidden worlds in a perhaps the most feasible and practical manner (Donmoyer, 2000).

The daily journal entries and company data were then analysed for keywords and phrases and themes, particularly relating to the technical, normative, governance and customer service dimensions of teamwork (Figure One). Data was coded by two of the authors. They then conferred before determining final categories and codes. This is a form of content analysis, a technique social psychologists have traditionally used to deal with qualitative data (Holsti, 1968; Lindkivist, 1981). Although the generation of categories and themes implicit in content analysis may not be ideal for understanding some of the subtleties of the discourse in the discussions with employees noted in the diary, for analysing diary data the method provides an effective portrayal of the broader culture and work structures in the organization. Descriptions of the work process are based on the report and experience of the researcher, who only worked the day shift. Extracts from the diary are inserted when appropriate.

Unsurprisingly, the method chosen to research the reality of teamworking in the hospitality industry comes with a range of limitational and ethical issues. For instance, commenting on unobtrusive participation observation Analoui and Kakabadse (1989) believe such methods can be a ‘long, laborious and often dangerous process, with the danger of “getting sacked”, one’s cover “being blown” or being made “redundant” ever present’ (1989: 13). Beyond the practicalities, however, lies a range of procedural obstacles. Indeed, it is believed that the nature of being “hidden” increases the chances of the researcher becoming passive to what is going on around himself or herself (Reicken, 1967) and being (hypothetically) less free than an overt observer decreases the chances of access to wider social interaction (Dean et al., 1967). What is more, a further consideration is of knowing when to withdraw from the research site (Viditch, 1969).

Whilst it is necessary to point out that covert data collection is a surprisingly common and efficient research method (Reynolds, 1979), we cannot ignore the lack of informed consent that comes with unobtrusive methods (Bulmer, 1982). Indeed, as the *British Sociological Association* (2002) points out, covert methods should only be considered, ‘where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data’

(2004: 5). We believe the nature of what is being researched – the reality of social interaction in a busy and highly conflictual environment combined with management unlikely to grant full access to an outsider in such situations – does not allow the use of open methods of collecting data. As such, every attempt has been made to anonymise the organisation and the people employed by the organisation. More importantly though, we also believe no other method is likely to allow the researcher to gain acceptance from both co-workers *and* management (Hodson and Sullivan, 1990).

The Organization: HRM Practices, Policies and the Approach to Teamworking

Hotelrest is the catering facility of a Hotel which is part of the Hotelcorp chain. Hotelcorp describes itself as a ‘global hotel’ and employed over 10,000 people in the UK alone at the time of the study. The study coincided with the introduction of a management initiative entitled ‘Trading Norms’ (this name is changed to protect the identity of the organisation and its employees), or in Hotelcorp’s own words (paraphrased and changed again to protect the identity of the organisation and its employees), ‘sustaining corporate norms through a trading identity, and a trading position supported by uniform employee behaviour and attitude, product consistency and performance’. Trading Norms involve the regulation and routinisation of all dimensions of work which are clearly documented and disseminated to employees through formal documentation, team meetings and training sessions.

At the research site, Hotelcorp employs around 250 employees. The hotel’s restaurant takes up to 230 ‘covers’ a day. However, there are significant retention problems for the 60 employees that work in Hotelrest. The aggregate turnover at Hotelrest is over 50 per cent despite Hotelcorp’s strategy of compulsory training and development programme entitled Practical and Personal Conduct Skills (name changed to protect the identity of the organisation and its employees) (PPCS for short). PPCS generally involved employees keeping a log book based on activities that reflected the ideals of the organisation, particularly relating to serving customers and maintaining an appropriate appearance and demeanour. Employees were expected to demonstrate such skills over several weeks and at least once in the presence of the trainer. The PPCS programme has a strong emphasis on teamwork. Completing PPCS training can, according to Hotelcorp, be up-dated to a nationally recognised vocational

qualification (NVQ level II for waiting staff and level III for supervisory staff). Moreover, completion of training entitles each employee to what Hotelcorp promotes as being a 'lucrative' hotel-related package of benefits. This includes greatly reduced admission to the adjacent health club and highly discounted room rates throughout Hotelcorp's chain of hotels. However, PPCS was not viewed as particularly effective at either engendering loyalty or retaining employees. One full time member of the waiting staff, Paul (not his real name), explained how it had taken nearly a year to complete the PPCS training and nearly two years later he was still awaiting his health club membership. Some members of staff had been with the company over a month and had, to date, received no PPCS training. At team meetings employees frequently complained about waiting for their card entitling them to the benefits package. Although one employee, when commenting on the discounted room rates noted, 'you get the smallest and smelliest room that they probably couldn't sell anyway.'

Hotelrest serving staff work in shifts of approximately 10 people. The composition of the shift varies day to day dependant on scheduling. Each shift team is frequently augmented with agency workers. As well as the serving staff there are about 10 individuals working in the kitchen as chefs, kitchen porters and hygienists. The hotel classifies both serving and kitchen staff as members of the Hotelrest team, however there is a clear separation between the waiting and kitchen staff. Importantly, as the fieldwork was carried out in the restaurant, rather than behind the scenes in the kitchen, this is the main focus of the research.

The Hotelrest serving staff are an even mixture of waiters and waitresses, the rest are supervisors, 'hosts' or team leaders (six), two assistant managers, and one restaurant manager. All supervisory staff and assistant managers have been promoted from within; quite rapidly in some cases. However, the restaurant manager was recruited from outwith the company. There is also a dedicated trainer who works approximately 25-30 hours per week. Pay for waiting work is low at Hotelrest with those aged 22 and over receiving an hourly rate on a par with the national minimum wage (NMW). Waiters and waitresses aged 21 years or below (the majority of the waiting group) earn less than their older counterparts, but higher than the NMW for this category. Supervisors earn about 10 per cent over the NMW

The human resource department also promotes an 'employee of the month scheme', distributes a series of company magazines, adorns the walls of staff areas with the latest company news, runs a prominent health and safety campaign, and organises monthly team meetings for each department. The focus of the team meetings as well as technical work issues such as health and safety and training also focus on 'upselling' and 'mystery' audits. The team meeting is compulsory and those that cannot attend must write and explain to the manager. This 'rule' is posted on the department notice board.

Teamworking at Hotelrest is probably best described as being ad hoc. Broadly all employees employed in the restaurant were considered by local management to be one big team. In reality, the team was made up of whoever was on a particular shift. As such, a typical team involved a fairly stable, consistent, yet minority of full-time employees, as well as a fairly irregular mixture of part-time employees.

Findings

The Technical Dimension – Taylorisation of the Work Process

The breakfast shifts in the restaurant commences at 6am. However, some members of the team start an hour later. At 6am the main duty is to finish the 'set-up' of the restaurant – which, for the most part was undertaken by the shift from the previous evening. This process, for the waiting staff, includes the laying out the cold buffets, juices, cereals, breads, jams, butter, milk, glasses, serving spoons and plates. This is completed in accordance with a check sheet held by the supervisor or team leader. The hot food was prepared by the chefs.

The kitchen staff are divided into three groups – chefs, kitchen porters and hygienists. These three groups have different uniforms. Kitchen porters perform relatively low skilled work – basic preparation tasks such as creating butter curls, making toast and producing coffee and fruit juices from concentrate. The hygienists are responsible for cleaning and tidying up the kitchen.

When the rest of the serving shift arrives for work at 7.00 a.m., the work progresses to the polishing of glasses and cutlery for lunch and dinner. In the meantime the team leader and host check the restaurant and make a rough plan for guest seating. At 7.30 a.m., there is a team briefing session where the supervisor allocates waiters to sections for serving or re-setting. It is only, however, by 8.30 a.m. that the majority of staff can be found in the restaurant both serving and clearing up or re-setting. In theory at least, waiting staff adhere to Trading Norms for serving. Once seated by the host the waiting staff approach guests and ask for an order of tea or coffee and toast. Other small requests can be made by customers such as fish dishes, poached eggs etc. This system normally works. When there is a 'rush' of guests, however, Trading Norms are abandoned. This results in guests being seated by waiting staff or in the worse case scenario, they end up seating themselves.

When all guests have left the restaurant waiting staff start to clear up the waste and plates. Re-usable materials are returned to storage or the kitchen where perishable, but reusable foods were dated and placed back into refrigeration. Once all the areas are cleared tablecloths are taken off and sent to the laundry. Typically at this point – between 10.15 a.m. and 10.45 a.m., staff will take a break. The break lasts about twenty minutes. This is followed by another team briefing where employees are allocated their next tasks.

Tables are then set according to the information provided at the team briefing. All co-ordination comes from the supervisor or team leader. Employees are afforded no autonomy. Tables are set for lunch or dinner depending if lunch is being offered on that particular day. If this process is completed quickly staff are allowed another break. However, this is rare. Compared to serving breakfasts, there tends to be a surplus number of staff which allows work to be undertaken at a leisurely pace. As a result even full-time members of staff are not guaranteed 39 hours of work per week. When there is less work available the company shares the work around rather than allowing some staff to have no work at all.

A third briefing is held before lunch, which again allocates waiting staff to sections. Lunch itself tends to be a buffet. The role of the employees is to serve soup, guide guests to the buffet and clear up after each course. A final clear up and clean is undertaken between 1.30 p.m. and 2.30 p.m. after the final lunch. Once this is

completed the restaurant is set up for dinner. This process heralds the start of the second shift which commences work at either 2 p.m. or 3 p.m.

The Governance Dimension – Controlling the Work Process

One of the key examples of the limits of governance responsibilities for the hotel staff emerges at the end of the shift – the requirement for staff to ask a supervisor if they can go home. One employee stated ‘in theory you can just go home when your shift finishes but...they can’t make you stay. You would be wise to ask nevertheless.’ However, overtime was frequently worked and employees are not even given the discretion to choose how to be compensated for this work. Team leaders decide whether overtime is taken as time in lieu or as an additional payment. No premium is given for overtime.

Even breaks are carefully regulated. During the first break (about 10.30 a.m. in the morning) waiting staff, kitchen staff (but not chefs) and supervisors are offered a meal in the staff canteen. Cereals and leftovers from the guest’s breakfasts are provided (although research observations suggested employees frequently help themselves to breakfast foods whilst serving). For the second break at 12.10 p.m., employees are again provided with a meal. This meal is not the same as that provided to guests (referred to by one member of staff as ‘slop’). Despite being allocated thirty minutes for the break, supervisors insist that employees return to work as soon as they have finished eating. Each break, in reality, tends to only last for about fifteen minutes.

Breaks however, disappear almost entirely when there are staffing shortages. As this extract from the 11th September shows:

Because of staff shortages we only had one very short break today at about 11.30 a.m. We were too late for breakfast and the food for lunch hadn’t arrived. Once the lunch guests had left, and after a brief clean up, we were allowed a second break just before 2 p.m. This was no use to the majority of us who only worked until 2 p.m. anyway. We were allowed to help ourselves to leftovers.

There was not only a high rate of absenteeism but managers frequently failed to engage with employees about availability which often led to conflict over working times. Whilst there were, by and large, no shortages of employees, lack of communication

between management and staff often led to confusion. This is illustrated by a diary entry on the 24th Sept:

Today, again, was a very busy day with 370 guests. I was called up at home at 6 a.m. in the morning by my supervisor who was slightly perturbed by the lack of staff who had shown up. At 6am he had two employees. I had been given the wrong rota, two other members of staff had turned up late and another was supposed to start at 7 a.m. but management thought he should be in at 6 a.m.

This event not only highlighted poor management, but the lack of any responsibility or voice given to employees. Moreover, when this episode was discussed at the midmorning meetings the supervisor – without acknowledging the failure in communication – announced that he would reward those that turned up on time. He pointed out that those employees who failed to turn up were letting down other team members. The supervisor failed to acknowledge the role of management in the debacle. In theory, mechanisms had been put in place to give employees a voice and control over their work. Yet, these were rarely put into practice, even at a very basic level. Employees were supposedly able to make requests about the shifts that they work. However, rota requests concerning such requests were frequently left unread.

The distance between employees and management was clearly portrayed in terms of staff uniforms. Tellingly, hosts, supervisors and team leaders were provided with a different uniform to team members. One particular event on the 3rd November demonstrated the pervasiveness of these ‘traditional’ managerial practices. A member of the supervisory staff began to read out the day’s proceedings to the variously assembled employees, but found it difficult to engage with all employees present at this moment in time. At one point he, mainly because some of the employees – easily identifiable by their uniform – were not paying close attention to what was being said, started shouting and swearing. The diary entry recalled how he called one female employee ‘a stupid bitch’. When questioned on the day’s events – a situation where the team struggled to cope with the volume of restaurant diners – he was quoted as saying ‘are you the fucking manager of this place? No? Well do what you are fucking told.’ A further diary entry included the following summarising comment: ‘not quite the espoused teamwork’.

Overall, employees were allowed little discretion over any aspect of their work. Every task, indeed every sub task, had to be performed either in terms of Trading Norms or other documented procedures (unless told otherwise by management). This went as far as how to address customers – employees were provided with plastic cards showing how they should attend to guests.

The Normative Dimension – Teamworking?

Ingram et al. (1997) noted that teams in the hospitality industry are characterised by inter-group conflict. This was confirmed by the findings of the current study. Not only were there tensions between young and old (the older members of staff thought that the younger employees were lazy), but also between the kitchen and the restaurant staff. On the 7th September the diary entry noted how there was a break time discussion about inter-group rivalry. One member of the waiting staff said ‘chefs don’t like us but we don’t like them either.’ This is a theme that was common in the field notes. Tensions arose when kitchen staff thought that waiting staff were not clearing up after themselves and therefore creating more work for the kitchen.

This division was re-enforced by kitchen staff not being invited to team meetings. Indeed, team meetings provided an arena for many other tensions in the group to be played out. This is illustrated in a diary entry from the 16th September:

As people come into the room, whether they were on duty or not, they sat with their friends. The supervisory staff sat on a table at the front of the room and looked like a panel. Dismayed that the room had been split up into cliques, John the host organised them in a random fashion so that the groups would have to be split up

As the field notes dated the 2nd of October explained, ‘it is becoming obvious that the ideas of teamwork in the restaurant do not bring cohesion between waiters and supervisors/managers. The team is at least two groups (if not more) with no inter-teamworking at all.’ In fact, from the three months of research in the restaurant there was only one explicit attempt at a teambuilding exercise and even this was focused on customer relations and sales. Employees were placed into groups in a team meeting and asked to sell a number of items to other members of the meeting – these items included a high chair, a soup bowl, a toast rack, tomato juice and salt and pepper

sachets. No one in the room appeared to take the exercise seriously apart from management:

After the final presentation the room began to quieten down. Debra asked the team as a whole what they thought the task was really about. No one would respond to this. However, Debra continued to talk about how it was ‘a way of expressing yourself... exchanging ideas...working together...to give you more confidence...so you can pull together as a team.’ She also asked the question ‘do you think you could have done the talk on your own?’ She finished with the words ‘we can’t do it on our own.’ This is a phrase that I am becoming increasingly familiar with.

Yet, despite this, employees complained bitterly in the team meeting that they never received help from other team members and one noted that ‘it’s not my problem’ or ‘I’ve not been told to do that’ were phrases that were commonly heard.

Conflicts between employees were mentioned in the diary on a daily basis. On the 2nd of October, one employee threatened to ‘kick the butt’ of another team member over the issue of re-using dirty dishes and cutlery. The more experienced of the two then started to use the official language and meaning of teamworking to challenge the attitude of his colleague. What appeared to be at the heart of an apparent emotional outburst was the ideas presented in the PPCS handbook – focusing on the notion of ‘letting other team members down’ when an employee does not pull their weight. Despite attempts by management to instil teamworking principles and ideals into everyday activities, normative values of being a team player, cultural cohesion was rarely put into practice. On the 17th October, one employee even stated, ‘teamworking is really every man for himself’.

Indeed, most employees appeared unhappy with their work, as shown in this diary entry from 23rd September:

I spoke to a woman who started at the same time as I did. She came out of her way to say hello and asked me what I thought of the job so far. I asked her and she said ‘I’d rather be stacking shelves in Tesco’.

Comments such as this were common. However, there were a few employees who appeared a little happier with the work. This was often based on the advantage of the

benefits package to them. A couple of female employees liked to travel round the country so made good use of the reduced rate hotel rooms. Another employee (28th October) spent a great deal of time explaining how pleased she was with her reward club membership. Although one of her colleagues stated, 'I see you are now a fully paid up member of the brainwashed club'.

Customer Service – Who is Serving Who?

Although the PPCS training was aimed at combining information on health and safety, HRM and teamwork, the focus was predominantly on customer service. The three hour introductory session prior to the commencement of employment exemplified this:

Anne introduced us to the PPCS training scheme and explained why it was so important i.e. Trading Norms... Particularly this session was concerned with how we presented information to the customer – it must be given with a smile and eye contact (5th September).

Another facet of customer relations – upselling – continued to be presented as a key issue to staff. In the team meeting on the 28th October employees were reprimanded for failing to tempt employees to purchase additional food or drink products. It was explained by a team leader that it was 'common sense' to ask a customer if they would like something else with their meal. She explained, 'if you are having a steak you would expect to be asked if you want a sauce to go with it'. Employees are rewarded for upselling with £2.50 worth of 'bonds'. However, it was a hard task to gain bonds. As an example, it would take ten liqueurs sold with coffee to achieve one bond. Other 'exceptional' customer service activities are also rewarded with such bonds. Those employees that arrived at work on time in the scenario described above were rewarded with a bond. Not only were bonds difficult to achieve through sales, they were often handed out on an arbitrary basis. There was very little evidence that they motivate employees, or indeed, improved customer service. Indeed, frequent comments were made by employees – noted in the diary – about the individualised and subjective way in which the bonds were deployed.

Despite the formal focus on Trading Norms, employees were frequently told to ignore them. One example of this was when a supervisor told the researcher to stop taking

the customer through the full breakfast procedure and to leave them to fend for themselves. Supervisors and managers were, in reality, acknowledging that it was almost impossible to meet Trading Norms. One guest staying from another hotel in the corporate group (10th October), after assuring staff he was not a mystery auditor, appeared somewhat cynical of the language of Trading Norms and stated 'you don't have to lay on all that bullshit with me.'

Nevertheless, a keen employee (hoping to be promoted to a position as a host) was dismayed at receiving contradictory feedback (24th October). He had attempted to keep to the Trading Norms but was, instead of being praised, admonished. One of his co-workers advised that instead of sticking to Trading Norms, individuals should just listen to the supervisors.

It was not only Trading Norms that were not being adhered to. The basic philosophy of customer service was often absent. One of the supervisors (17th October) was witnessed answering the telephone to a customer requesting room service and stating with no apology, 'we are too busy'. He immediately put the telephone down. Customers were asked to fill in 'guest satisfaction surveys' and a 'customer comment card'. The latter was seen as the most important indication of customer satisfaction. Based on the data report of the last quarter's customer comment cards, many suggested that restaurant staff were either incompetent or needed training. There were frequent remarks made about the level of disorganization found in the catering staff. Interestingly, the most customer service audit indicated a sizeable increase in customer satisfaction with Hotelrest. Despite customer service, commonly being viewed, by management at least, as overriding any of the normative, governance and technical requirements of teamwork, there appeared to be limited success in this domain. In basic terms, employees had been indoctrinated into the importance of customer service through Trading Norms and believed that they were succeeding in their performance. Yet, guests thought the reality was somewhat different, with the rating for customer service being below that of other hotels in the group.

This was surprising considering virtually all training (although limited in itself) was focused on customer service. Apart from the teambuilding exercise undertaken by employees in the team meeting, the only other training was a 'Development Day' on the 6th November. Meeting customer needs was taught using video clips and asking

how employees should react to scenarios. Product knowledge was focused on upselling. There were also sessions on complaint handling, communicating and selling/promoting products. Furthermore, employees competed in a Trading Norms quiz where they worked in small groups to win a small prize. Each team was given a fluffy animal and the team captain had to make the noise of the animal in order to indicate that their team could answer the question. Nonetheless, few people knew the answer to the questions, unless they focused on their particular work area. Even then, most employees were unsure about the answers.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to examine, *in situ*, whether teamworking, even in a diluted form, is present in the hospitality industry. By using unobtrusive participant observation and directed conversations we were able to gain a greater depth of understanding about the work process and context than other methods are able to permit. We started this paper with a discussion and a re-developed conceptualisation of the managerial aims of teamwork in the form of the Team Dimensions Model (TDM). However, even using this as a method of analysing teamwork practice, we found in Hotelrest, that teamwork was only really implemented as a managerial ideology aimed at tightly controlling and determining a wider range of employee behaviour and activity. Despite a clear rationale by management for teamwork – as a mechanism to implement good customer service in the guise of Trading Norms – the Taylorised nature of Trading Norms made the performance of any technical or governance behaviours, especially under stressful condition, unworkable. Whilst the catering group were defined as a team for the undertaking of work, there was no joint nature to the technical division of work and no collective responsibility or indeed flexibility in terms of work organization.

Although other work on teams in the service sector – predominantly looking at call centre teams – found tight control, high commitment management and low value incentives (e.g. Kinnie et al., 2000), as we found here, we also found teamwork to be unworkable due to the size and nature of supervision of the team. The team was so poorly defined that this form of work organization ultimately caused significant and

potentially irresolvable conflict between groups of employees rather than harmony. The size and structure of the team fashioned a situation which was entirely in opposition to the unitarist ideology espoused by the firm. Even the weak or diluted form of teamwork identified by other researchers failed to materialise (e.g. Batt, 1999; van den Broek et al., 2004). There was no indication of collective learning or problem solving (apart from the odd example of self-organised employee resistance) and the only true function of teamwork appeared to be as a structure of control over employees and Trading Norms.

If we take each of the four dimensions of teamwork one by one, we can develop an even clearer picture of the contradictions and failure of teamwork in this setting. Starting with the technical dimension, there is considerable evidence for the 'Team Taylorism' identified by Baldry et al. (1998). The requirement to adhere to Trading Norms and other formalised procedures directs work to be routinised and controlled with a distinct lack of flexibility. Clearly, as with most teams (see Findlay et al., 2001a for a more detailed discussion), teamwork was introduced at least in part, with the technical dimension in mind. Yet, one could argue the principles of teamwork have been misconstrued. Instead of being used to develop employee autonomy and encourage knowledge transfer, the team was were entirely cosmetic and were used along with Trading Norms to formalise and control work practices. As Thompson and McHugh argue that;

Unless teams or task groups are allowed the time, space for action, confrontation and autonomy that would allow them to develop into sentient groups the probable outcome will be no more than a heightened sense of domination within processes of control (2009, p. 386).

This leads us onto the governance dimension. There was absolutely no indication of devolved responsibility or the expanded managerial responsibilities for team members traditionally associated with teamwork (Proctor et al., 2004). Employees had no control over the management of their breaks, no authority over the work process. Any minimal influence offered to them (e.g. work scheduling requests), were rarely recognised by supervisors or team leaders. Team meetings were used as a mechanism for downward information transfer and weak attempts at team building. They did not afford employees the opportunity to voice any opinion or make suggestions. Any

flexibility in the system was based on supervisors or team leaders telling employees to abandon Trading Norms. From the information collected, it was apparent that employees had a clear understanding of the problems and weaknesses in the system. Utilising employees' knowledge and allowing them independence to make decisions would not only improve the work process but also enhance employees' perception of work.

Lack of control, could be provided as at least one explanation of the dissatisfaction with their work expressed by employees. But other factors were apparent, particularly when we look at normative integration. As noted before, hospitality teams are characterised by size (e.g. Ingram and Desombre, 1999; Rees, 1999). These large teams are typified by intra-group conflict and tension (Rees, 1999). Although normative factors are embodied in cultural cohesion and as a method for instilling corporate values, informal groups within these team structures provide opportunity for both resistance and resilience (e.g. van den Broek et al., 2004; Findlay et al., 2000a; Richards and Marks, 2007). This makes it impossible to meet Ingram et al.'s (1997) suggestion of transferring the benefits of the informal group to the formal team. In the current case, this was exemplified by breaking the team into smaller unstable groups and when employees derived their own informal groups they were broken up by management (as demonstrated above in the discussion of the team meeting).

Putting front-line employees into teams was clearly used as a structure for instilling corporate values into employees – most notably in the form of Trading Norms. Whilst formally, supervisors and team leaders used the idea of 'letting the team down' as an attempt to influence employee behaviour, this term was frequently used 'ironically' by employees. Any normative values that the organization attempted to instil in employees, was quite clearly seen by team members as being manipulative and, as such, failed as a management practice. Yet, Trading Norms, in reality, appear to be a very explicit justification for teamwork. Indeed, our research confirmed that of Ingram and Desombre (1999), customer service detracts from other normative requirements of teamwork.

Customer service in manufacturing could be viewed as being part of the technical dimension – general multi-skilling dealing with internal and external customers. However, it is a much greater component of the work for service sector employees.

Yet, in this case, customer service and Trading Norms actually detracted from the principles of teamwork. Not only were Trading Norms abandoned as soon as there was any intensification of work, but their Taylorised procedures also constrained creativity, innovation and any possibility for employee involvement. Whilst Trading Norms were designed to improve the processes, hand in hand with enhancing customer service, their prescriptive nature appeared to be responsible for the disparity between employee's perception of customer satisfaction and the reality of guest opinions.

Although the experience of teamwork in manufacturing does not convert easily to service work, the technical, governance and normative categories of the TDM (with the addition of customer service) are still of use for identifying the managerial objectives and organizational outcomes of teamwork. The addition of customer service as a factor in the team dimensions model appears also to be of value. At least, in this case, unlike the technical dimension in manufacturing, customer service was *the* rationale for teamwork. Indeed, along with cost reduction and increased productivity it appears to be a key factor for the introduction of teamwork in other service settings (e.g. Baldry et al., 1998). However, teamwork, as van den Broek et al. (2004) established, is extremely difficult to implement in service settings.

Where hospitality work has an advantage over call centre work as a 'natural' basis for teamwork is that it is easier to develop multi-skilling and devolved responsibility as there is greater variety and flexibility in terms of work potential. On a structural basis, smaller and definable teams could be developed around shift patterns and requirements, rather than the ad hoc basis that currently exists in Hotelrest. In this instance, the lack of real teamwork appeared to present a significant constraint to both performance and employee satisfaction. A careful examination of hospitality work suggests that although teamwork is even less evident than other service settings (e.g. Batt, 1999; Mulholland, 2002) it is perhaps more possible. Teams could be given the space to make decisions about work flow, breaks and customer interaction as well as support to learn and resolve problems.

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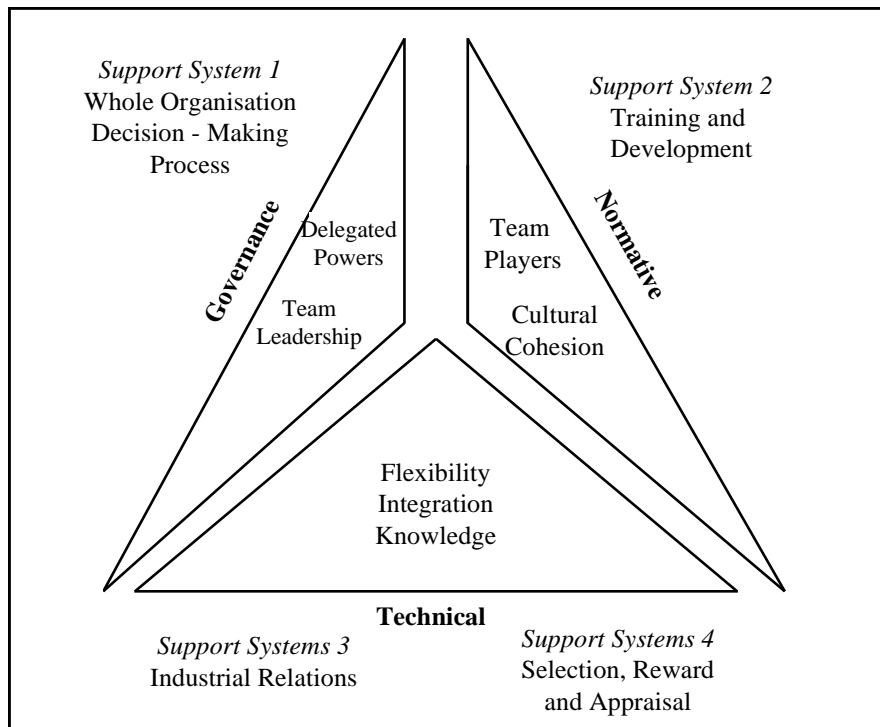


Figure One: The Team Dimensions Model (Thompson and Wallace, 1996; Findlay et al. 2000a, 2000b)

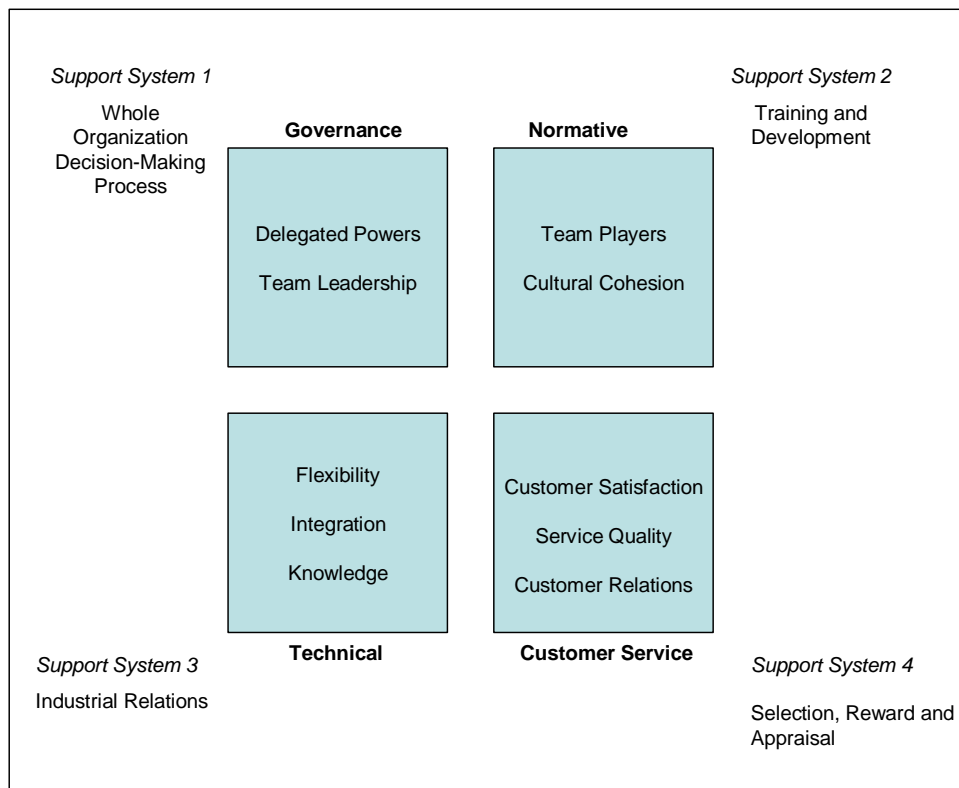


Figure Two: Team Dimensions Model – Service Additions