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Working in Teams

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Working in Teams

Abstract

{Excerpt} Cooperative work by a team can produce remarkable results. The challenge is to move from the realm of the possible to the realm of practice.

Groups that range from two persons to many are a very big part of social life (indeed, of human experience). They can be significant sites of socialization and learning, places in which beneficial relationships form and grow, and settings where knowledge and wisdom flourish. Because they also offer individuals the opportunity to work together on joint tasks and develop more complex and larger-scale activities (projects), groups can be highly rewarding to their members, organizations, and society at large. On the other hand, the socialization they offer can constrict or even oppress members. Groups can also become environments that exacerbate interpersonal conflict, for example if one individual dominates or tries to "score points." In addition, the boundaries that are drawn around them can exclude others—sometimes to their detriment—and create intergroup conflict. What is more, belonging to a group often warps the judgments of members: pressure to conform can lead to "groupthink" or poor decision making. Other, well-nigh mundane shortcomings include diffusion of responsibility; excessive diversity of views, goals, and loyalties; and the tendency to "solve" (but not analyze) problems. These potential strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats make groups an essential focus for research, exploration, and action, for instance regarding group development (teamwork) in organizations.

Keywords

Asian Development Bank, ADB, poverty, economic growth, sustainability, development

Comments

Suggested Citation

Required Publisher's Statement

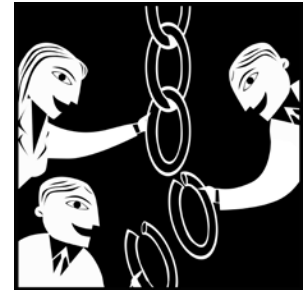This article was first published by the Asian Development Bank (www.adb.org)

Working in Teams

by Olivier Serrat

Cooperative work by a team can produce remarkable results. The challenge is to move from the realm of the possible to the realm of practice.

Background

Groups[1] that range from two persons to many are a very big part of social life (indeed, of human experience). They can be significant sites of socialization and learning, places in which beneficial relationships form and grow, and settings where knowledge and wisdom flourish. Because they also offer individuals the opportunity to work together on joint tasks and develop more complex and larger-scale activities (projects), groups can be highly rewarding to their members, organizations, and society at large. On the other hand, the socialization they offer can constrict or even oppress members. Groups can also become environments that exacerbate interpersonal conflict, for example if one individual dominates or tries to "score points." In addition, the boundaries that are drawn around them can exclude others—sometimes to their detriment—and create intergroup conflict. What is more, belonging to a group often warps the judgments of members: pressure to conform can lead to "groupthink" or poor decision making. Other, well-nigh mundane shortcomings include diffusion of responsibility; excessive diversity of views, goals, and loyalties; and the tendency to "solve" (but not analyze) problems. These potential strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats make groups an essential focus for research, exploration, and action, for instance regarding group development (teamwork) in organizations.

Rationale

In our day, most organizations embrace the notion of teamwork. The justification is that teams are better at solving problems and learn more rapidly and with more effect than individuals.[2] (As a minimum, they are meant to help divide work and thereby increase productivity with speed.) Still, if teams are often deemed a necessary component of organizational success their use does not guarantee it. To tell the truth, many are apprehensive about teams, or even pessimistic about their value. Most prefer to deal with individuals. Others are happier still when working on their own. Therefore, to leverage the potential value that teams can add and ensure that they are effective, members must have more than

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[1] Definitions of a group abound but one can identify common attributes. A group is a set of individuals who identify with one another; share beliefs, values, and norms about areas of common practice or interest; define themselves (and are defined by others) as a group; engage in frequent interactions; and come together to work on joint tasks for an agreed common purpose. Importantly, this list suggests that groups are intended and organic—whether they are primary or secondary, or planned or emergent, they are not a random experience. Therefore, there are three crucial characteristics to groups: there are parts, there is relationship between the parts, and there is an organizing principle.

[2] By nature, teams embody wider and deeper knowledge, broader understanding, a greater diversity of problem-solving styles and skills, and firmer commitment.

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a limited appreciation of what teamwork is and what it entails: they must be competent in using small-group skills. Since these are not innate and collaboration usually stems from a feeling of being "in the same boat," entering teams or forming them and then behaving in such ways that members can interface, take responsibility, and work together effectively on joint tasks can involve quite sophisticated abilities on the part of practitioners. (The challenge augments in the increasingly common case of virtual teams, certainly with regard to spatial distance and the technology needed to bridge data, information, and personal communication needs.)

What is Teamwork?

From the foregoing, it follows that teamwork is a process whereby a small number of people—commonly three to 10—with complementary skills become committed to a common purpose and reach agreement on specific performance targets and indicators, a working approach, and mutual accountability. It follows further that teamwork is not a panacea, a management fad, or a way to cut costs: it is a means to an end. A team does not make "things" happen: it enables them by looking to purpose, thinking as a group, and keeping in touch with the identity and integrity of members.

When to Use Teams

Is a team the best organizational structure for what an organization sets out to accomplish? Not necessarily. Given the potential weaknesses and threats associated with teams, they should only be used in situations where their strengths and the opportunities they offer are critical. That is when

- The problem is relatively complex, uncertain, and holds potential for conflict.
- The problem requires inter-group cooperation and coordination.
- The problem and its solution have important organizational consequences.
- There are tight but not immediate deadlines.
- Widespread acceptance and commitment are critical to successful implementation of a response to a situation, condition, or issue.

The Characteristics of Successful Teams

Successful teams share many characteristics. They tap the diverse knowledge, skills, experience, and interests of members; they generate more creative responses to challenges than individuals; they catalyze fresh ideas for new products and services, better business processes, and profitable strategies; they hone the leadership abilities of members; they carry out their mission with dedication, energy, and efficiency; they engender feelings of satisfaction and pride among members; they channel conflict into productive directions. The enabling environment for such accomplishments rests on:

- Positive interdependence.
- Individual accountability.
- Use of emotional intelligence.
- Promotive (face-to-face) interaction.
- Group processing.[3]

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[3] In group processing, members reflect on the team's work and the interactions among members to clarify and improve efforts to achieve the team's purpose and maintain effective working relationships. This involves describing what member actions were helpful and unhelpful; and making decisions about what actions to continue or change.

The Keys to Developing a Successful Team

To develop a successful team,

- **Encourage the Team Leader to Follow the Manager-as-Developer Approach.** In high-performance, contemporary organizations, team leaders must move beyond the adequate accomplishments their heroic methods have pulled off. Their prime functions are now to help determine and build common purpose, continuously develop individual skills, and groom shared-responsibility teams. These functions require technical competence—it goes without saying—but problem-solving abilities and interpersonal skills in particular.
- **Clarify the Common Purpose.** The members of the team must understand what the purpose is and believe that it is sufficiently important for them to sublimate their personal concerns.[4] For this, they need to know what outcome they are expected to deliver and understand how they will work together toward it.
- **Build Trust.** Trust is a fragile thing: it takes time to build and it can be destroyed instantly. It is important to keep all team members in the loop. As attention drifts to new initiatives, team leaders may forget to alert members to opportunities or challenges. Belatedly, members may receive data and information that might have influenced their actions and they may begin to question interest in their efforts. Team leaders should also be candid about their problems and limitations. They should be available and approachable, fair and objective, and consistent and dependable. They should listen with respect to the ideas of members. They should also create a climate of openness in which members can reveal and thrash out difficulties without fear of retaliation.
- **Establish Mutual Accountability.** For a team to qualify as such, all members must feel responsible for both successes and failures. There must be mutual accountability.
- **Deliver Quick-Wins.** It takes time to develop a successful team. Its members should put quick-wins under their belts. This can be done by setting achievable targets and spotlighting team progress. Easy accomplishments will drive cohesiveness and confidence.
- **Set Up A Team-Support System.** Organizations that pay lip service to the value of staff working together offer little support. But, it is still possible to set ground rules when the team is formed. They might cover issues such as rotation of members and duties, including leadership; announcements about milestones met; rewards for individual efforts; standards by which the team evaluates its own progress; and even the process by which the team will disband if members think it has lost its usefulness.[5] If the success of the team depends critically on resources from the organization, it is important to make sure those resources will be there.
- **Teach Team Members New Skills.** Team members and the team as a group may need to build their knowledge and skills. This may be in the areas of problem solving, communication, negotiation, conflict-resolution, group processing, and learning as a team.[6] The opportunity for training can revitalize a team. If a team is charged with and is made responsible for training members in the best possible way to do a job, its chances of success will be higher.
- **Rotate Team Assignments.** Teams are formed as needed. Work, however, may become monotonous over time. Depending on the complexity of assignments, it is possible to rotate functions and jobs, including leadership, sometimes even through drawing. Besides keeping interest and morale high, this approach ensures that members are cross-trained; it acts also as an informal certification system. On occasion it may also be necessary to change the composition of a group (if that is possible).
- **Reward Team Members.** One of the hardest things for organizations to recognize is that if they install teams, they need to reward based on teams. The team's performance management system should reward interdependence and mutual accountability. Ways to evaluate and reward contributions to collective, not individual, goals can include cash and noncash awards.

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[4] Notwithstanding, in a fast-changing environment a team can find itself working on a mission relevant to an obsolete strategy. To avoid this the team should review its purpose regularly in light of changing organizational priorities.

[5] Regular review of team processes and procedures is necessary too.

[6] Learning as a team is often overlooked. Training in this area can focus on what makes a learning team; creating and maintaining a learning environment in teams; understanding professional mindsets and valuing diversity; harnessing emotional intelligence; understanding learning preferences and how to use them; and avoiding "groupthink" through the use of "devil's advocates."

The Stages of Team Development

Teams are always work in progress. Bradford and Cohen have described team (group) development in terms of five stages leading from to simple membership to shared responsibility.[7] The stages they distinguish also provide a relational model against which to judge progress toward a shared-responsibility team.[8] At that stage, individual uniqueness and collective effort are both valued. The team addresses the issues that are vital to the joint task. Members keep each other informed without wasting time. They trust one another to act, but all fight hard and fair over issue-based disagreements. A team can soar that is truly dedicated to its common purpose, able to move freely between individual and collective effort, willing to confront and support members, dedicated both to performance and learning, and increasingly eager to take on management functions.

Common Operating Characteristics of the Stages of Task-Group Development

Behavioral or Skill Area	Membership	Subgrouping	Confrontation	Differentiation	Shared Responsibility
Atmosphere and Relationships	Cautious, feelings suppressed, low conflict, few outbursts	Increasing closeness within subgroups, cross-group criticism, false unanimity	Hostility between subgroups	Confident, satisfied, open, honest, differences	Supportive, open, expressive, varied; disagreement resolved promptly
Goal Understanding and Acceptance	Low, fuzzy	Increasing clarity, misperceptions	Up for grabs, fought over	Agreed on by most	Commitment to overarching goal
Listening and Information Sharing	Intense, but high distortion and low disclosure	Similarities within subgroups not as great as perceived	Poor	Reasonably good	Excellent, rapid, direct
Decision Making	Dominated by active members	Fragmented, deadlocks, to the boss by default	Dominated by most powerful, loudest	Based on individual expertise, often by the boss in consultation with subordinates	By consensus, collective when all resources needed, individual when one is expert (not necessarily the boss)
Reaction to Leadership	Tested by members, tentative	Resisted, often covertly	Power struggles, jockeying for position	General support, individual differences in influence	Highly supportive but free to disagree on issues
Attention to Way the Group is Working	Ignored	Noticed but avoided, discussed outside meetings in small groups	Used as weapon against opponents	Alternates between uncritical or overcompulsive discussion	Discussed as needed to aid work accomplishment; anyone can initiate

Source: David Bradford and Allan Cohen. 1997. Managing for Excellence: The Guide to Developing High Performance in Contemporary Organizations. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

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7   The (relatively simple) stages of team development identified by Bruce Tuckman in the 1960s (and refined in the 1970s) are (i) forming, (ii) storming, (iii) norming, (iv) performing, and (v) adjourning.

8   Although not every group (team) progresses in exactly this sequence (and many do not get past subgrouping or confrontation), each of the stages is common enough, and the issues fundamental enough, that the model serves as a useful approximation of reality.

Further Reading

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For further information

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Asian Development Bank

ADB, based in Manila, is dedicated to reducing poverty in the Asia and Pacific region through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration. Established in 1966, it is owned by 67 members—48 from the region. In 2007, it approved $10.1 billion of loans, $673 million of grant projects, and technical assistance amounting to $243 million.

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