# Leading through the complexities of team dynamics to achieve and sustain organizational goals

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the narrative literature review is to explore the complexities of team dynamics as well as theories and practices that are necessary to create a workplace team that comes together in a sustained and effective manner toward a common goal. This article will compare and contrast several theories on the concepts of team building and identify key elements involved in creating unity within a team.

Keywords: Teamwork, Team Building

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## INTRODUCTION

Peter Drucker, the eminent business authority who coined the term "knowledge worker," brings to attention the point that while people have always worked in tandem, in the future "teams will become the work unit rather than the individuals themselves" (1973, p.15). As a point of reference, when discussing the concept of team building, this paper refers to the definition provided by Jim Krug (1997): "Team building is a process of deliberately creating a team from a newly formed or existing group of people. It emphasizes not just the content of group problem-solving, but the processes and manner in which the group resolves team issues" (p.15).

Section one of this paper addresses the complexities involved in teamwork and the development in creating a cohesive, effective and efficient team. Section two will discuss the necessary inter-group skills involved in creating and unifying a successful team. The third section identifies and defines the different types of teams. Finally, section four discusses different team building techniques and models. Section four further analyzes the different tools and styles for team building as well as the environments for which they are best suited.

## **SECTION ONE: COMPLEXITIES**

Effective intragroup collaboration and problem solving are becoming increasingly important as organizations are becoming more complex and more information-intensive, thus making teamwork a very valuable asset (Nicholson, 1990). To best understand how team building works, it is important to have a clear idea of what team effectiveness entails. For the purposes of this research, team effectiveness will be considered successful if the team meets two important conditions. First, the members of the team will have accomplished something of value by reaching a worthwhile goal they set for themselves or had presented to them. Second, they will have maintained or increased their sense of cohesion or group integrity and willingness to work together (Harris, 1990).

Before a group can accomplish these two steps, it is important to understand the obstacles that can impede its progress. Prior to selecting the members of a team, it is important to address what Palleschi & Heim (1980) refer to as "hidden barriers" or the lack of groundwork beneath a cohesive group. This groundwork consists of: shared knowledge, shared territory and same communication availability.

The institution of management cannot exist without that particular vocabulary which has been designated "managerial." It is important for a group to have the same vocabulary and level of sophistications. Knowledge, or lack thereof, builds an "out-group" as well as an "in-group." Making it difficult for others to gain knowledge, by holding "closed door" meetings or utilizing confidential forms of written communication, can make those holding the knowledge value their group membership to a greater degree than those who lack the knowledge (Palleschi, 1980). Conversely, this approach can also create a sense of isolation and alienation for those on the "outside" of the informational loop. Openly sharing knowledge provides opportunities for all members to add value to the group, therefore adding to the cohesive process.

The concept of shared territory refers to the location where groups will meet. Jack Anderson (1977), a political columnist, believes that people tend to be on "better behavior" and tend not to disagree or argue when they are not in their own environment. Groups need to give

careful consideration to where their meetings are held. A free exchange of information may be inhibited by the sense of being in another's territory. In addition, one member may exert an inappropriate amount of power if meetings are held in his or her own territory (Henley, 1977).

Although there are many different roles within a group, it is important to emphasize the group's identity over the individuals who comprise the group. The saying "there is no I in team" best illustrates this point. The concept of stature sameness promotes this initiative. Within the group it is important to emphasize that every member of the team is equally important and serves a vital function. When attempting to establish equality within a group, special attention should be placed on the environment in which the group will be spending the majority of its time together. Details such as the type of table used at meetings may seem trivial to some, however, there is a cultural norm that often accompanies the position at the head of a rectangular table. If someone is elected group leader, the most likely position for them to assume is at the head of the table. Strodetbeck & Hook (1961) created experimental jury deliberations and found that the person sitting at the head of the table was chosen significantly more often as the leader, especially if perceived as someone from a high economic class. In addition to the quality of leadership, dominance and status also tend to be associated with the end positions. Due to the perceived importance usually associated with the position at the head of a table, members should take note of who tends to sit in that position and what effect it has on the group's structure. That seat may afford one member the defacto leadership of the group or it may allow that person to dominate and sway group decisions – solely because of the seating arrangement (Hare, 1963). Finally, physical comfort and aesthetically pleasing surroundings may cause people to spend more time together, expanding the necessary social dimension of processes that foster cohesion (Hiem, 1980).

While addressing the physical and social environment prior to forming a team is important, it is equally important to discuss the types of team members needed and their personality types. According to Drucker (1973), management tasks typically require at least four different kinds of human beings: the people person (amiable), the thought person (analytical), the action person (driver), and the front person (expressive). Drucker states that it is unlikely and uncommon for one individual to possess all four strengths. The concept of social style aids in analyzing the process of team building while at the same time offering valuable insight into the organization's management structure. As mentioned, the four social styles are: amiable, analytical, driver and expressive. None of them is better or worse than the other; rather, each has a key role to play in organizational team building (Darling, 1990).

The two crucial behavioral dimensions of assertiveness and responsiveness form the axes of the social style grid, the four quadrants of which represent the four social styles. The effective managerial team is typically made up of and values all four types of individuals. This can happen by chance or by intentional selection. It has been hypothesized that the most productive team in a given organization will have a balance of individuals who reflect the four social styles (Darling, 1990).

According to Harris and Nicholson (1990), there are ten "sand-traps" which hinder the team-building process and must successfully be negotiated in order to achieve a cohesive unit. The first trap is a stalled start. This occurs when an organization hesitates to initiate a team-building process until one last key person has given his or her approval. The second trap is when organizations fail to recognize that team building is a long-term, strategic investment in time and resources, not a quick fix. The third trap focuses on management's good intentions without any actions. Commonly referred to as "lip service," this takes place when upper management voices

support for the team's initiatives but fails to act on them or offer any tangible support. The fourth trap concentrates on a class of people the authors have titled "The Untouchables." These are individuals who are critical to the process but are entrenched in the "old way" of doing things. They can hold powerful positions but are personally opposed to the concept of teamwork and group efforts. The fifth trap involves a myth that implies team building always has a happy ending. Team members believe that once the team is formed and all the groundwork has been laid, things will run smoothly; however, this is not the case. The team-building process entails living in a vibrant, ever-changing organization. Teamwork taking place and accomplishing things in meetings is the mindset for the seventh trap, which is also a misnomer. The truth is that while team decisions are made together, the work is done when the team is apart. Trap eight deals with the authoritative leader who gets frustrated with the process and, rather than contributing to the participative decision-making process, will yield permissive results by throwing his or her hands up and giving the power to the team without actually supporting their decision. The ninth trap, team-building fatigue, is perhaps the most common, as many teams must devote time and resources to their particular project while also maintaining their normal duties. The tenth and final trap is referred to as "The Big Sand-trap in the Sky." The culture of most organizations is still highly individualized and therefore not prone to the endorsement of team building by nature. The larger American cultural environment surrounding organizations still supports individual aggressiveness and competitiveness. This is a major obstacle, even though it may be a very subtle one (Harris, 1990). This mindset places the individual before the team, group or organization. If one member is more focused on individual accomplishments, then his or her concentration is not on contributing fully to the team, and as a result the team will suffer.

This section has introduced and described many of the obstacles and complexities surrounding the concept of developing teams in the workplace as well as the actual teambuilding process. It is important to understand these issues and prepare for them accordingly before the initial development of the teams. The next section discusses the skills required for successful communication and operation within the team environment.

## SECTION TWO: INTER GROUP SKILLS

According to Hart (1997), the success of a business is dependent on the quality of the interpersonal relationships between the members of the work teams as well as the executive teams. Hart further believes that the common denominator for successful competition in the market place is teamwork and that positive, coordinated teamwork depends on leadership.

In the article "Psycho Logic 101," Hart implies that many of the interpersonal skills crucial for creating the capabilities for change, growth and thriving professional relationships, as well as successful teamwork, can be learned from basic psychological principles. One of the most significant of these basic skills is empathy (Hart, 1997).

James Champy (2005) states:

"Managing must, of course, begin with an objective, and quickly be followed by empathy. Understanding what your people, your customers, your suppliers and even your competitors are going through is critical to making intelligent decisions when business conditions are difficult. The caring part of empathy, especially for the people with whom you work, is what inspires people to stay with a leader

when the going gets rough. The mere fact that someone cares is more often than not rewarded with loyalty" (p.4).

Empathy occurs through being genuine while understanding and accepting the subject reality of others and holding positive regard for others in relation to their subjective reality (Geisler, 2002). The ability to discern feeling in oneself as well as others and to use this knowledge to positively impact business outcomes is known as emotional intelligence or EQ. Mayer and Salovey's model of EI is composed of four emotional competencies: (a) accurately perceiving emotions in oneself and others (emotional perception), (b) using emotions to facilitate thinking (emotional facilitation), (c) understanding emotions, emotional language, and the signals conveyed by emotions (emotional understanding), and (d) managing emotions so as to attain specific goals (emotional regulation) (Mayer et al, 2008). Typically, leaders who learn to judge a person's emotion through subtle cues, such as facial expression or tone of voice, are more successful in their business and personal relationships (Macaluso, 2003).

Increasing one's emotional intelligence level or EQ can be accomplished through several methods. Paying attention to body language, such as subtle shifts in facial expressions, eye contact, posture and energy levels can provide valuable insight. By listening more than speaking and paying attention to others' tone of voice, including intensity and pace, further insight can be gained. Powers of observation are powerful tools in this situation. In any research environment, data is collected when the objects of the research are studied, observed and interviewed. The parallels between active listening and observing and research are very similar and yield similar results. Furthermore, taking a break from speaking allows for moments of silence. Historically, silence implies wisdom and is the pathway to it. The search for wisdom or insight has been connected with the practice of silence and is believed to help one withdraw from worldly concerns (Forrest, 2013). However, there are those who are uncomfortable with silence and tend to fill the void with conversation (Macaluso, 2003).

Equally as important as empathy is the willingness and ability to shift one's core values and beliefs in regard to how one perceives working with a team. For example, one could characterize this shift in values and core beliefs as a change in the way one thinks about power. Also, most people operate from assumptions that power is a scarce commodity and that power as represented by status, prestige, position and possessions is acquired or forfeited as the outcome of a competition or struggle of some kind. All of these assumptions in turn rest on an even more fundamental belief that affects how people relate to each other. At an unconscious level, most people believe that they are completely separate, independent beings and consequently that interdependence is a sign of weakness or immaturity, whereas heroes are self-made, dominant, and independent achievers (Lawford, 2003). Because one's automatic behavior is determined by these unconscious assumptions and beliefs, no amount of training will produce a sustained modification of that behavior. Training programs, especially those of the short-term variety, operate at the conscious or rational level and therefore have little effect on one's automatic or habitual behavior. This distinction between conscious and automatic behavior is an important consideration in developing effective teams, especially for those that move beyond the level of a merely functional team to the higher level of a cohesive, high performance team that organizations desire.

It is important for those in leadership positions to help team members understand the rational basis for adopting a new set of beliefs, assumptions, and the corresponding attitudes and behaviors. It is also important to be mindful that the choice to behave in a manner consistent

with the new beliefs has to be a conscious choice made by each individual (Lawford, 2003). Teams that have been asked to do more without proper tools, skills and infrastructure support have been known to become bitter and resentful, further supporting this concept (Ray, 2001). Not being properly equipped to perform a task creates frustration and a sense of defeatism prior to beginning the tasks.

## **SECTION THREE: TYPES OF TEAMS**

It is important to recognize that the term team can have several different meanings and functionalities. "Teams consist of individuals who share common goals and interpedently accomplish tasks" (Kozlowski & Bell, 2013, p.5). When team building is done poorly, the teams are viewed as an end in and of themselves, and little money or effort is invested in their success. Successful teams, however, are viewed as a strategy, a synergistic blending of human resources for achieving an organization's goals. Placing such a high priority and status on the team shows support and importance, thus validating the members and their purpose. When an organization begins its team-building efforts, it must first determine the types of teams needed. Teams should be formed only when an achieved goal with a specific objective can be identified. Each type of team serves a particular purpose and has specific characteristics and benefits. According to Deborah Harrington-Mackin (1999), there are six basic team compositions. Organizational Policy Making Teams, often called Quality Councils, identify major areas of concern/opportunity and articulate organization needs. Task-Force or Cross-Functional Teams sometimes referred to as Process Improvement Teams or Product Launch teams; include five to eight members from two or more different work areas with membership based on experience. This type of team meets over a short period of time; implements a strategic plan for addressing the problem/concern/opportunity and assumes investigative, corrective and interactive functions. Department Improvement Teams include only department members. These teams select problems and identify solutions, restricted in scope to the activity within their department. Quality Circles include members from functional areas who work together in specific quality, productivity, and/or service problems. Self-Directed Work Teams include employees who work together on an ongoing, day-to-day basis and who are responsible for a "whole" work process or segment. Self-Managed Teams operate with varying degrees of authority and without a visible manager. They contract with management to assume responsibility in addition to performing specific jobs, including planning, organizing, directing and mentoring; they control their own operation (Harrington-Mackin, 1999).

## SECTION FOUR: TEAM BUILDING TECHNIQUES

According to Berman (1999), building productivity is vitally important to the success of a company. Personal responsibility, ownership, involvement, communication, recognition and reward are building blocks to greater productivity. Good managers need to understand the forces that motivate people to greater performance. They need to understand the nature and goals of their people and begin to weld together a team that transcends individuals (Berman, 1999). It is necessary for members of a team to put the team first, before individual accomplishment. Business Week Online (2001) emphasizes that every successful organization needs leaders who can create a sense of excitement in the workplace and in turn aid in the "bonding" process amongst team members. Cohesiveness and bonding are critical for a team in that they promote

unity and togetherness. The entire concept of teamwork is centered on this concept: a group of individuals working together as one unit toward a common goal.

This theme is repeated often throughout literature, which underlines the importance the leadership role plays in creating a sense of cohesiveness within a group setting. One of the techniques used to accomplish this goal has become known as "team-building retreats." The purpose of these meetings is to allow groups to bond with each other in hopes of creating highly productive work groups. When it comes to choosing an activity or location for these meetings, it is further apparent that the more creative one becomes, the better. According to O'Connor (2013), "building a team requires three basic elements, and they are the same perpetual needs that all team leaders have: engagement, education, and development, all with a twist" (p.1). The twist mentioned in the article implies going above and beyond traditional meetings and making them engaging and memorable. There is value in entertainment as it relates to both training and team building.

## **ANALYSIS**

When it comes to the selection, formation and development of a team in the workplace, the literature mentioned throughout this research supports that this task should not be taken lightly; thorough preparation and planning is mandatory for the success of a workplace team. Communication is much more than simply how one writes or speaks; the actual vocabulary chosen can play a critical role from the onset of the team's formation (Palleschi, 1980). It is not only where, when and how often a team meets, although that is important. The physical environment and social settings in which these meetings take place are also factors that can contribute to a team's success or failure (Hiem, 1980).

It is imperative to understand not only each team member's qualifications, but their personality types, learning and leadership styles as well (Darling, 1990). Investing the time to understand and match the members of a work group will give an organization greater control over the dynamics of that group and, in turn, can overcome potential obstacles before they actually arise. The investment in planning and preparing play a major role in determining the future success of a team within an organization.

The importance of strong and effective leadership is a recurring theme throughout the supporting literature on this topic (Hart, 1997, Champy, 2004, & Geisler 2002). Empathy and flexibility were the two key themes in regards to effective team leadership mentioned throughout this research. The ability to listen and understand, not only the team members' concerns but those of the clients and customers as well, was ranked as one of the most critical skills for a team leader to possess (Champy, 2004).

The ability to empathize with, understand, and react to people in such a way that problems are addressed as opposed to escalated is referred to as Emotional Intelligence (EQ), another critical skill for those in leadership roles (Macaluso, 2003). This goes beyond just listening and responding correctly but noticing subtle shifts in ones body language, facial expressions and conversational tonalities. It is a total sense of alertness to those with whom one is interacting.

A deeper understanding of the different types of teams, their compositions and their unique functions is also important when considering the formation of workplace teams. Just as the parts of a car engine all serve a unique purpose and are not interchangeable, teams are also

unique in purpose and design (Harrington, 1999). Once the appropriate team and members are selected utilizing previously mentioned criteria and groundwork, it is equally important to define the roles of the members along with the desired outcome and goal for the team itself (Cebryznski, 2001).

When it comes to selecting which team-building activity is most appropriate for an individual organization, the options are as varied as the groups themselves. The predominant key outcomes, however, are consistent: cohesiveness, bonding, trust, communication skill development, problem solving and productivity. There are those who believe that team-building seminars and activities should reflect local culture (Gilmartin, 1995).

## **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this paper we explored the complexities of team dynamics and the theories and practices required to create a team-oriented culture that enables the achievement of common goals. We first addressed the complexities associated with team dynamics. Care must be taken to remove barriers by creating open communication vehicles to increase shared knowledge. The physical and social environments should not be taken for granted and it is important to understand the cultural norms of the organization to establish a welcoming and effective team environment. Also, when assembling a team, having a balance of personality types, such as Drucker's (1973) amiable, analytical, driver, and expressive, will increase harmony and overall effectiveness. Finally, careful planning reduces the likelihood of many of the "traps" often associated with team dynamics. The organization must recognize that team building is a long-term, strategic investment and that establishing realistic expectations and work balance can help reduce fatigue while increasing effectiveness.

Inter group skills discussed the components necessary to create and unify a successful team. Empathy and the ability to use emotional intelligence increases positive feelings and positively affects business outcomes. Sometimes this requires a shift in core values and beliefs, especially with regard to power and how people generally relate to one another. Those in leadership roles must be able to help team members make these shifts in an effective manner that is consistent with team goals. In addition, the most common types of teams were identified. Leaders must recognize that "team" has various connotations and uses; thus, selecting the appropriate type of team for the organization or specific task is important. Team types range from a more policy level, such as quality councils, to a more individual level through self-directed work teams. Each type of team has the ability to bring tremendous value to the organization but must be appropriately selected.

Finally, once the stage is set to strategically utilize teams, the real work of actually deploying team-building techniques commences. Team leaders need to understand the factors that motivate team members to higher levels of performance. Team cohesiveness is often achieved through leaders who truly create a sense of excitement in working together to achieve a common goal. Sometimes this can be a simple process and other times it requires an actual retreat to bring focus to the team process. Leaders take heart; lead your team to victory by using these principles.

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