

Teamwork

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Abstract

Teamwork has become in the recent years a major area of enquiry for researchers, academicians, and practitioners. The importance of teamwork in organizations has been largely recognized. Nevertheless, what really makes a 'team' work is still to be understood and figured out in clear terms for implementation purposes. The present paper attempts to address some of the significant issues related to teamwork in organizations.

Introduction

The present environment has resulted into greater complexity which has made the need and importance of teamwork highly critical. More organizations now are multinational, multi-disciplinary, diversified, flat, and dispersed (geographically and culturally). There is an increased pressure on organizations for performance.

To manage such a complex environment, people with diverse background and expertise are needed. Polzer (2003) argued that teams are ideal for performing tasks that combine high complexity and high interdependence. Tasks high on complexity require a number of people with a diverse set of skills and expertise who can combine their effort to perform the task. Similarly, high interdependence among various task components indicates the need for integration of efforts of various specialists responsible for each component (p.4). However, managing such a group of experts with diverse background and skills who might have varied perspectives on any problem or an issue itself could be a complex task.

Team has become a buzz word. More and more organizations report structuring work around teams (Abbott, Boyd, & Miles, 2006; Barner, 2000; Mohrman, Cohen, & Mohrman, 1995). Most people agree that team approach is an answer to today's many complex problems. Efforts have been made to understand the team work in organizations. A lot has been written on teams in the past decade. There are a number of articles and books available suggesting solutions for fixing team problems.

Nevertheless, a lot more clarity is required to understand what really makes a team work. Just by putting a few people together to accomplish task(s) does not result in teamwork. Further, teamwork *may* not be needed in each and every situation, and for each type of task.

Before we address some of the issues related to teamwork, let us first have a common understanding of the term 'team'.

Team Definition

What is a team? Is it different from a group? If yes, what is the difference? One also comes across in the literature words like 'work group'. Is it just a matter of using different words to connote the same thing or there are substantial differences? Let us see a few definitions to examine this issue.

The term 'team' has been defined differently by various people. "Teams are collections of people who must rely on group collaboration if each member is to experience the optimum of success and goal achievement" (Dyer, 1977, p. 4). Mohrman, Cohen, and Mohrman (1995) defined a team as "a group of individuals who work together to produce products or deliver services for which they are mutually accountable" (p.39). According to Huszco (1996), "The most generic definition of a team emphasizes that it is two or more people interacting together to accomplish a common purpose" (p.8). Based on her observations of cross-functional product development teams, Donnellon (1996) defined team as "a group of people who are necessary to accomplish a task that requires the continuous integration of the expertise distributed among them" (p.10). According to Larson and LaFasto (1989), "A team has two or more people; it has a specific performance objective or recognizable goal to be attained; and coordination of activity among the members of the team is required for the attainment of the team goal or objective" (p.19). An aspect that team has a common goal is emphasized by various scholars (e.g., Jessup, 1990; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Lewis, 1993; Shonk, 1992).

Many scholars seemed to have used the words 'team' and 'group' or 'work group' interchangeably (e.g., Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Hackman & Walton, 1986; Kauffeld, 2006; Schwartzman, 1986). Polzer (2003) argued that rather than having a clear demarcation, teams and groups lie along a continuum that consists of the amount of interdependence among the people.

Let us also see some of the definitions of the term 'group'. According to Walton and Hackman (1986), group is perceived as such both by members and nonmembers; members have significantly interdependent relations with one another; members have differentiated roles within the group; and the group operates in an organizational setting, managing relationships with other groups or their representatives (p.169). They further distinguished between two types of groups – organizationally created work teams and self-enacted informal groups and argued that these two types of groups play different roles and have different dynamics in control and commitment organizations (p.170). Brett and Rognes (1986) defined an organizational group as "a set of individuals who perceive themselves and whom nonmembers perceive as constituting an identifiable social aggregate within an organization. ... The only definitional requirement is that members and nonmembers recognize the group as a distinguishable social aggregate that exists within the boundaries of the organization" (p. 204). "When a work group has at least one goal that is common to all members and when accomplishment of that goal requires cooperative interdependent behavior on the part of all group members, team building may be an appropriate intervention" (Burke, 1995, p. 3).

A close look at these definitions indicates that the word 'group' is a part of the definition of 'team'. Team is a group. However, group may or may not be a team. For a group to be a team, certain conditions may be important. Another observation that the author would like to make is that more has been written on 'group' in 1970s and 1980s. Since the beginning of 1990s, one comes across more and more books and articles written on 'team'

and less on 'group'. It may be worthwhile to explore the reasons behind the shift in focus of scholars from group to team.

Common purpose or goal and interdependence – these two appear to be the key elements in a team. The team has to have a common goal and the members of team depend on each other for the achievement of that goal.

Team Types

Are there different types of teams existing in the organizations? Is there a need for different types of teams?

Larson and LaFasto (1989) identified three types of teams depending on the broad objectives that each of the team had. These were - problem-resolution teams, creative teams, and tactical teams. The broad objective of each of these teams, their dominant features, and their process focus were also identified. The broad objective of problem-resolution team was "to resolve problems on an ongoing basis", its dominant feature was 'trust', and its process emphasis was on 'focus on issues'. The broad objective of creative team was "to create something", its dominant feature was 'autonomy', and its process focus was on 'exploring possibilities and alternatives'. And the broad objective of tactical teams was to "execute a well-defined plan", its dominant feature was 'clarity', and its emphasis was on 'high task and role clarity'.

Huczczco (1996) found five main types of teams in organizations: an informal sense of teams; traditional work units with a supervisor; problem-solving task forces, committees, and circles; leadership teams, steering committees, and advisory councils; and self-directed work teams.

Mohrman, Cohen, and Mohrman (1995) identified three kinds of teams in organizations. These were work teams, integrating teams, and improvement teams. According to them, organizations may establish teams for a number of different purposes, and each kind of team presents a different set of challenges to those managing the team.

Levine and Tyson identified two broad categories of teams – consultative (parallel) teams and substantive (institutionalized replacement initiative) teams. What distinguishes these two types of teams is the authority that the members of teams have in implementation of proposed solutions. The substantive team members have the authority to implement the solutions that they develop whereas the consultative team members do not have the authority to implement the solutions that they develop (cited in Abbott, Boyd, & Miles, 2006).

Different classifications of teams exist in the literature. Purpose or nature of task for which the team is established appears to be one of the main factors influencing the categorization of teams.

Team Effectiveness

Donnellon (1996) emphasized that for teams to work effectively, it is important to recognize and address various paradoxes and contradictions that team work poses for individuals, teams, managers, and organizations. According to Donnellon (1996), team work is paradoxical as it requires differentiation among members and integration of members into a

single working unit. She further argued that the comprehension of opposition of differentiation and integration in team work and learning to manage the tension is necessary for team work but it may not be sufficient since teams create a number of other paradoxes for team members such as the paradox of individuality, the paradox of identity, the paradox of interdependence, and the paradox of trust (p.13).

Based on research conducted with more than 100 of the most effective teams in business, Huszczo (1990) identified seven key components for building team effectiveness – a clear sense of direction, talented members, clear and enticing responsibilities, reasonable and efficient operating procedures, constructive interpersonal relationships, active reinforcement systems, and constructive external relationships.

To explore the characteristics, features, or attributes of effectively functioning teams, Larson and LaFasto (1989) interviewed the leaders and members of a diverse range of teams such as cardiac surgery teams, mountain-climbing teams, etc., and identified eight characteristics associated with team success. These were: a clear, elevating goal; a results-driven structure; competent team members; unified commitment; a collaborative climate; standards of excellence; external support and recognition; and principled leadership.

McGregor listed eight unique features of an effective managerial team: (1) understanding, mutual agreement, and identification with respect to the primary task, (2) open communications, (3) mutual trust, (4) mutual support (5) management of human differences, (6) selective use of the team, (7) appropriate member skills, and (8) leadership (cited in Burke, 1995, p.10).

Some of the characteristics of an effective team as listed by Hanson and Lubin (1995) were as follows: team shares a sense of purpose or common goals; team is aware of and interested in its own processes and examining norms operating within the group; team identifies its own resources and uses them depending on the team's needs at any given time; group members continually try to listen to and clarify what is being said and show interest in what others say and feel; differences of opinion are encouraged and freely expressed; team is willing to surface conflict and focus on it until it either is resolved or managed in a way that does not reduce the effectiveness of the individuals involved; team exerts energy toward problem solving rather than allowing it to be drained by interpersonal issues or competitive struggles; roles are balanced and shared to facilitate both the accomplishment of tasks and feelings of group cohesion and morale; to encourage risk taking and creativity, mistakes are treated as sources of learning rather than reasons for punishment; team is responsive to the changing needs of its members and to the external environment to which it is related; team members are committed to periodically evaluating the team's performance; team is attractive to its members, who identify with it and consider it a source of both professional and personal growth; and developing a climate of trust is recognized as the crucial element for facilitating all of the above elements (p.77).

Guzzo and Dickson (1996) defined effectiveness in groups “as indicated by (a) group-produced outputs (quantity or quality, speed, customer satisfaction, and so on), (b) the consequences a group has for its members, or (c) the enhancement of a team's capability to perform effectively in the future” (p.309).

Drexler, Sibbet, and Forrester (1995) developed a team performance model that had seven primary interdependent elements – (1) orientation, (2) trust building, (3) goal

clarification, (4) decision making, (5) implementation, (6) high performance, and (7) renewal – each representing a set of concerns team members face as they work together. The model also described some symptomatic behaviors for each element to signal whether concerns of that element had been resolved or not.

Various scholars have identified certain features or conditions that might lead a team to effectiveness. The author proposes that what is likely to work in terms of features or attributes for one team may not work for some other team. While discussing the factors leading to effectiveness of team, one would have to keep in mind the purpose for which the team was formed. Further, how (the process followed) the purpose or objective was achieved is equally important.

Conclusion

Team is a group which has a common purpose or goal – it could be anything from developing a product or idea to executing an idea or strategy or becoming a market leader or winning a match – and to achieve this common goal, members need each other and are dependent on each other for skills, expertise, knowledge, support, etc.

Also, willingness to work together is an important element. While forming a team, someone who is approached to join the team has to have willingness to join the team. Also already existing members should be willing to work with the new entrant. However, willingness to work together may be treated more as a part of process of working together. Willingness to work together may be developed or get developed as the team moves forward. Willingness to work together with all or a few members may also get decreased if the process gets affected.

Some teams may be relatively permanent such as departmental teams, others are temporary that last as long as necessary to accomplish a particular task such as committees, task forces, etc.

How to develop a team approach, and what makes a team effective are some of the issues that concern most of us. What processes are needed to make a group of people work (effectively) in a team? These are some of the issues that the present paper attempts to address. Though efforts have been made in the past to explore issues related to team effectiveness, many more systematic efforts are required to say something in definite terms.

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