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## **Managing Teams in the Workplace**



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# Managing Teams in the Workplace

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## Work Teams

Teams in the workplace should be developed based upon organizational goals and objectives. Team structures are characterized by two or more individuals interacting on a regular basis with a shared performance goal. Although individual team members may have different responsibilities (or tasks) within the team, each of the tasks may be interdependent upon the other. The synergy or interaction among team members produces an output that is greater than the sum of their individual efforts. Organizations have recognized the importance of work teams and the value of their contributions to the effectiveness and efficiency of organizational goals.

## Differences between Groups and Teams

Are groups and teams the same? The answer is no. The following information depicts differences between groups and team interactions in a workplace setting.

### Groups

- Individuals will work independently and often competitively to determine who can impress the “boss”. Individuals are held accountable for their own work, but not held responsible for the output of other individuals.
- Group members are given administrative tasks without providing any input to the work itself.
- There is minimal or no participation among some group members in decisions that affect the team. In some situations, the dominant personality of a group member may cause others to conform to “group think” or make others ambivalent to express opposing ideas or views.
- Group members may experience interpersonal conflict among each others that is dysfunctional and impacts the group’s ability to obtain organizational goals. Selfish motives and ambitions of individual group members impact the group’s ability to collectively resolve issues.
- Communication among group members is minimal and manipulation or withholding of information may be used for personal gain. Distrust among group members may be an inherent factor in limited communication efforts.

## Teams

- Members acknowledge their interdependence, but work collaboratively to achieve personal and organizational goals. Their participation within the team serves as a “motivator”.
- Members are appreciated for their diversity in skills, life experiences, talents, and knowledge that are contributed to the team. Accordingly, suggestions are encouraged on how to best achieve organizational goals.
- All members are encouraged to participate and reach decisions in a collaborative effort. In emergency situations or situations involving time constraints, the team leader (often the manager) will have the final ruling.
- Functional conflict involving tasks related to the job is “opportunistic” if it helps to uncover new ideas. In most cases, conflict is resolved in a constructive manner.
- Open communication is practiced among the team members. There is a sense of “trust” among team members to express unpopular ideas and opinions.

## **Group versus Team Centered Managers**

Similarly, there are differences between the qualities that group centered managers demonstrate in the workplace relative to team centered managers. Group centered managers impose limitations on employee involvement in organizations. Information may be withheld from employees, in part, because group managers may be threatened by employees who know their jobs better than the manager. Furthermore, there is minimal trust between the manager and employee and the conflict between group members often goes unresolved.

On the other hand, team centered managers encourage individuals to get involved and practice open communication to facilitate this behavior. To alleviate boundaries of separation, the team centered manager is referred to as the “team leader” and adopts a “hands-on” approach to assist fellow team mates in achieving organizational goals. The team centered manager encourages functional conflict if such leads to opportunities to improve processes related to the task involved. However, dysfunctional conflict is mediated before it reaches the point of destruction among team members. Team centered managers are also “visionary” and exhibit more of a personal style to management that enhances the trust relationship and creates the environment for teamwork.

## **Types of Teams**

Formal Teams. Formal teams are created as part of a formal structure. Vertical, Horizontal, Task Force, and Committees are four types of formal teams in organizations.

*Vertical teams*-vertical teams consist of a manager and subordinates in the formal chain of command. Vertical teams exist typically in single departments that consist of subordinates reporting to a single manager(s) in a hierarchical fashion (i.e. accounting team or customer service team).

*Horizontal teams* consist of employees from the same hierarchical level, but from different levels of expertise. Employees that are part of a horizontal team typically have different levels of expertise. For example, one employee may be represented from accounting, computer information systems, human resources, and marketing to work on a single project. Two examples of a horizontal team are a task force and committee.

*Task force* consists of a group of employees drawn from different departments that are formed to deal with a specific activity and disbursed when the activity is complete. Task force teams are derived to deal with problems that occur within an organization and are often short lived.

*Committees* are a permanent part of an organizational structure that deal with tasks that occur on a regular occasion.

### **Employee Empowerment Teams**

Employee Empowerment Teams are designed to increase involvement of lower-level employees and increase decentralization of decision-making. Examples of employee empowerment teams are self-directed teams, problem solving teams, and virtual teams.

*Self-directed teams* consist of 5 to 20 multi-skilled workers who rotate jobs to produce output or a service. The team takes responsibility for actions, not the manager or supervisor.

*Problem-solving teams* consist of 5 to 12 employees from the same department who discuss ways to improve quality, efficiency, and the work environment. In some organizations, problem-solving teams are called quality circles. Employees typically report to the supervisor for approval on decisions.

*Virtual teams* use computer technology so that geographically distant members can collaborate on projects and reach common goals. The offices of team members may be scattered abroad so that any interaction must be conducted in a virtual manner.

### **Sizes of Teams in Organizations**

The size of a particular team within an organization depends upon the task to be completed. Small teams (2-5 members) show more agreement, ask more questions, and exchange more opinions and are more cohesive than larger teams. Smaller teams also talk about more personal issues than larger teams.

Larger teams often have more disagreements and differences of opinions and higher turnover and absenteeism. There are also fewer opportunities to participate and the communication is poor. Coordination efforts of larger teams take a considerable amount of time and results in slow decision making. In some instances, subgroups or “cliques” form among team members and conflict occurs.

### **Stages of Team Development**

The interaction of team members is an evolutionary process that occurs in stages throughout the duration of the team’s maturation. Essentially, there are five stages of team development that individuals experience as a process of team involvement.

*Forming.* The first stage of team development is the forming stage characterized by a period of orientation and getting acquainted.

*Storming.* The storming stage of team development is characterized by the emergence of personalities, conflicts and disagreements among team members. Team members may experience a temporary lack of unity.

*Norming.* The norming stage of team development is characterized by team harmony and the development of unity. During this stage, the conflict is resolved and the norms and values of individual team members start to emerge. Similar norms and values will increase cohesiveness among team members.

*Performing.* The performing stage of team development is characterized by problem-solving and accomplishing the team’s task. Members are committed to the team’s mission and accomplishing organizational goals.

*Adjourning.* The adjourning stage of team development occurs once the team’s task has been accomplished and members disband.

### **Cohesiveness and Unity among Team Members**

Team cohesiveness is the extent to which individuals have a desire to be a part of the team and motivate other members. Several factors contribute to team cohesiveness. The more individuals interact with each other, the greater the desire for team involvement. Shared goals, purposes and norms (values) also strengthen the team bond. Similar attitudes and values promote unity. In some cases, the presence of competition motivates team members to work collaboratively to ‘win’. Finally, team success plays a major role in creating unity as outsiders view the team favorably. Examples of things that teams do to demonstrate cohesiveness include similar apparel (t-shirts, uniforms, etc.), attend social events, and share common team names.

## **Advantages of Teamwork**

One of the primary advantages of team participation is the broader range of perspectives achieved collectively as opposed to one individual. The more diverse the group of individuals, the more information, knowledge, and skills can be shared among team members. There is also greater flexibility and job exchange regarding work responsibility.

Additionally, there is an increased effort on behalf of employees who participate on teams. Team participation also increases personal satisfaction because individuals have a “sense of belonging”.

## **Disadvantages of Teamwork**

In contrast, there are several costs associated with belonging to a team. Social loafing or “free-riding” is the tendency for only a few members to carry the weight of other team members. Some individuals will “cruise”, “hide”, or “pretend” to participate while contributing very minimally to the project. Groupthink is a phenomenon that occurs when individuals are ambivalent to express objections to the general consensus of the group in fear of being rejected or ridiculed. Risky shift describes the decision making behaviors of group members that decide more liberally as a group than an individual might do on his or her own. In other words, the group is often willing to take greater risk when shared upon a multitude of members.

## **Managing Team Conflict.**

Conflict is an inevitable part of any team experience. As a manager, the most important skill required for effective team management is managing team conflict. However, it is important to understand the potential causes of conflict among team members:

- Scarce resources in the form of money, information, and supplies
- Ambiguities related to job boundaries and responsibilities
- Communication breakdown which results in misunderstanding among team members (especially regarding differences in perceived motives, words, and actions)
- Interpersonal conflict among team members that prohibits productivity. Personality clashes may be a large concern when there are differences in needs, values, and objectives. Such differences may prohibit individuals from working through issues.

## **Implications for Understanding Team Conflict**

Conflict becomes an unhealthy part of the team experience if the issues are avoided or approached from a win/lose standpoint. As such, team members may begin to resent each other, communication will gradually break down and trust will be ruined. These actions will have a negative impact on productivity.

In contrast, conflict is considered healthy or “functional” when it stimulates the thought process of team members towards a positive outcome. When dealt with constructively, conflict can encourage team members to be creative. Such creativity leads to greater variety and stronger results.

Bargaining, negotiation, mediation, and communication are all effective ways to deal with conflict among team members.

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