

"Perhaps the biggest reason for the movement toward empowered teams is the fact that teams work" (Wellins, 1991)

Introduction:

This essay will describe how teams operate in the author's current workplace, where his duties include managing data integration projects for 6 independent banks across 8 states, involving interaction with members of multiple group types, including:

1. Cross-functional, "virtual" task forces:

Comprised of employees from different functional and geographical areas, temporarily working together on projects to achieve specific goals, such teams are usually "virtual". At any given time, there will be 4-5 ongoing long-term projects. Since most team members are physically dislocated, the use of e-mail, remote access to company computer networks, and the Internet are used extensively for managing data standardization projects. Team members must be highly collaborative in order to complete assigned tasks.

". . . one of the thorniest problems . . . how to get all those individuals working together compatibly and productively, even though face-to-face contact was limited . . ." (Geber, 1995)

What Geber's (1995) research included was the issue of "trust" among team members. Trust playing such an essential part in effective team collaboration, the author believes management of "virtual" project teams requires members to better articulate some of their personality characteristics. Interestingly, virtual teams might have the advantage of forming opinions of others based on performance, rather than appearance. As well, virtual teams must create trust from the outset, based on the timeliness and thoroughness of communication and task completion. "The more immediate response to a virtual communication (an e-mail for example), the more trust is built." (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998) It may be that other team demands prevent one from responding immediately to every e-mail. Some members read e-mail on the weekend; others do not. What about during travel or vacations? These are matters for the team to discuss initially and set out their own expectations. If the team is expecting a response within an hour and a member takes a day, trust can be jeopardized.

Additional methods the author uses for developing virtual team collaboration include:

- a. Engaging the team in setting expectations about behavior and performance. Recording the team's decisions and commitments to each other (McMahan, 1998).
- b. Clearly defining member responsibilities (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998).
- c. Using rigorous project management disciplines to ensure clarity (Geber, 1995).
- d. Determining, as a team, how conflict will be addressed and resolved.
- e. Keeping communications in a shared database for use in new member orientation (Geber, 1995).
- f. Matching desired activities with performance evaluation factors. (Myers & McLean, 1997; Geber, 1995).
- g. Providing feedback on all team activities.

2. Committee:

On a monthly basis, the author reports the status of his projects to 3 separate standing committees, collectively comprising all of the corporation's senior managers and executives. The committees formulate and oversee strategic policy, approve project plans, and function as steering committee members. Perhaps due to the corporate philosophy of allowing each bank, as well as departments within banks, to operate in a highly autonomous fashion, the functioning of interdisciplinary committees is somewhat dysfunctional, for the following reasons:

- a. Executive committees are composed of too many members to communicate effectively (upwards of 4 dozen per committee), and is thus unwieldy.
- b. No single individual assumes leadership of committee meetings, so there tends to be much discussion, without direction or collaboration.
- c. There are usually no well-defined purposes or cohesive objectives to be accomplished during the committee meetings.
- d. The meetings are formal, humorless, stuffy, and tense.

3. Self-Directed:

For certain specialized, rapid development projects, such as building a departmental intranet or a data mart, the author will form a 2- to 4-person team of subject matter

experts from within his own department. Project success depends upon individual initiative and swift decision-making, influenced by close, continuous communication and the interpersonal skills of group members. The advantages of the self-directed teams include a high degree of creativity, productivity and efficiency. Some of the team traits include:

- a. It works independent from other projects to which team members may be assigned.
- b. Clear Purpose: The vision, mission, goals and tasks of the team are defined and accepted by everyone.
- c. There is usually no designated leader, with each member responsible for the completion of his or her own tasks; leadership is functional rather than authoritarian.
- d. Every person is highly committed to the project, accepting individual accountability for the success or failure of the group effort.
- e. All members participate in the planning, development and implementation of all tasks, from start to finish.
- e. Civilized Disagreement: No signs of avoiding, smoothing over, or suppressing conflict.
- f. Consensus Decisions: For important decisions, the goal is substantial but not necessarily unanimous agreement through open discussion of everyone's ideas, avoidance of formal voting, or easy compromises.
- g. Open Communications: Team members feel free to express their feelings on the tasks as well as on the group's operation. There are few hidden agendas.

Conclusion:

Research conducted by Wheelen, Murphy, Tsumura and Kline (1998) demonstrates a clear correlation between positive group dynamics and team productivity. Knowing how to draw together a team and how to provide them with the skills and tools necessary for teamwork may be among the most crucial roles of the project manager. Every work group can become a work team and every work team can become a superior work team (Kinlaw, 1991). That individuals perform separate and uncoordinated tasks, even in widely dispersed geographical setting, does not prohibit them from working together to accomplish a whole host of integrated functions that are characteristic of team behavior.

References

- Geber, B. (1995, April). Virtual Teams. *Training*, 32, 36-40.
- Jarvenpaa, S., & Leidner, D. (1998). Communication and Trust in Global Virtual Teams. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication and Organization Science: A Joint Issue*, 3. Retrieved July 27, 1998 from <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue4/jarvenpaa.html>
- Kinlaw, D. (1991). *Developing superior work teams: Building quality and the competitive edge*. Toronto: Lexington Books. Retrieved 27 July 2006 from http://www.strategy2reality.com/resources/teamresources.html#Section_Part-1
- McMahan, Kevin (1998, August). *Effective Communication and Information Sharing in Virtual Teams*. Unpublished thesis, Regis University. Retrieved 26 July 2006 from <http://www.bizresources.com/learning/evt.html>
- Myers, J., & McLean, J. (1997, July). Knowledge management for citizens: advice in the 21st century: an innovative IS strategy. Retrieved June 7, 1998 from <http://web.archive.org/web/20010807034249/http://www.ifi.uio.no/iris20/proceedings/11.htm>
- Wellins, Richard; Byham, Willian and Wilson, Jeanne (1991). *Empowered Teams: Creating Self-Directed Work Groups that Improve Quality, Productivity, and Participation* (Jossey-Bass, 1991) ISBN 1-55542-353-1. Retrieved 26 July 2006 from http://www.strategy2reality.com/resources/teamresources.html#Section_Part-1
- Wheelan, Susan A.; Murphy, Donald; Tsumura, Eisaku; and Kline, Sheryl Fried (1998). Member Perceptions of Internal Group Dynamics and Productivity. *Small Group Research (FSGR)*. 29 no. 3 (June 1998): 371-393.